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DARK

DURG

THE ISHMAEL OF THE HILLS

THE ISHMAEL OF THE HILLS.

OR,

THE GOLD PHANTOM.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "A ROYAL FLUSH,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BEGGAR-MILLIONAIRE FALLS AMONG
THIEVES.

"It won't do, Humpy; an' when you hear me preach I say somethin'. No oro, no whisky. The slate's bu'sted, an' they ain't no room fer more chalk-marks on the door."

"One—just one swallow, mate! To drive away—ugh!"

He cast a shivering, quailing glance over his shoulder toward a dimly lighted corner of the saloon, his eyes glowing redly, his nostrils looking pinched and white.

"Just one drink to drown those—smash their heads, pard! Don't let them crawl so—they're gone!"

He leaned against the rude bar, trembling in every fiber, brushing the damp drops from his brow with one unsteady hand as he drew a long

breath of relief. Whatever the grizzly phantoms his shattered brain had conjured up, they had vanished into nothingness, and for one brief moment the poor wretch was happy. But only for an instant. That horrible thirst returned with redoubled force, and he muttered:

"Just one, mate! I'll pay you its weight in dust, just as—"

"Shell out, Humpty, an' here she am," but one strong paw retained its grasp on the black bottle. "You've hit her too heavy a'ready, but it's 'g'inist the law to deny a man with the money to pay fer it. I wouldn't credit my gran'daddy fer—"

He thought long experience behind, the bar had armed him at every point, but his blunt speech was cut short, and he felt his red face turn still redder as Humpty Dick flashed a proud, almost haughty look over the rude barrier. Sharp and clear rung out that voice:

"Why say that, when it is written on your face, Dan Nipperley? Your sole god is gold, and for a dollar you would cheat the very eyes out of your own mother's head! Give me a drink! I've spent gold enough in this hell-hole to pay for it all a thousand times over. I'll spend as much more—I'll fill the glass twice over with pure dust, if you ask it—give me one more drink, old mate—just one!"

Sharp and clear and contemptuous at first, only to quaver and degenerate into the pitiful whine of the broken-down drunkard who can see naught between him and "the horrors" but a glass of the vile poison which was surely destroying him. And quite as naturally the red glow in the brutal face across the bar turned to anger.

A huge fist vibrated before the face of the deformed, and a gruff voice growled out savagely:

"That's the one ye'll git, Humpty Dick, an' it'll send ye so fur yer mule-loads o' oro'll melt afore ye git back! I've had enough o' ye fer once. Skin out afore ye hev to call fer a cart to tote ye! Not a drop o' drink do ye git in this shebang, ef ye was to lay down dead loads o' the dust—d'y' mind that?"

The deformed shrunk back, pale and ghastly, though it did not seem altogether fear. There was a wild, half-idiotic glare in his eyes. His bony fingers were picking nervously at his bosom. A low, cracked laugh came faintly through his tangled beard, and then the broken sentences:

"Loads of it! Mule-loads—boat-loads—enough to dam a big river—and all mine! Enough for a million, yet all mine!"

The sound of his own voice appeared to startle him, and the poor wretch cast a hasty, covert glance about him. More eyes than one pair were turned upon him, but none with an interest greater than that generally bestowed upon one who is playing the fool without wages. Save and except those of Dan Nipperley.

"Yender's the door, ye travelin' sign, an' the quicker ye git to the other side, the less danger ye'll run o' broken bones. I've taken too much o' yer lip a'ready. Git—in a hurry, too!"

"A bit of a night-cap, mate," mumbled the deformed, fumbling in his pockets with eager fingers, smiling sickly as he glanced apologetically around the little congregation. "I'd call all hands, gents, but I'm broke—dead strapped just now. Another time—plain whisky, Dan; I'm tapering off, you know."

"It's the juice o' fives, in the shape of a punch ye'll git, Humpty Dick, ef ye don't levant in a holy minnit! Scat! not a drop more will ye hev this night out o' my bottles."

The burly barkeeper made a move to abandon his position, the ugly scowl upon his uglier face telling plainly enough what course he had in view, but a swift alteration came over his face and manner as a man swung up to the counter, leaning his back against it, thumbs in the armholes of his vest, shining hat tipped over his brows, the stiff brim fairly meeting the ash-tipped cigar. An evident plagiarism on the historical "Mose," thinly disguised by a more modern if not graceful garb.

Tall, with broad shoulders and long arms of which a professional bruiser might have been proud, and a "mug" that said "fight" in its every line and scar; in the low, retreating forehead, the small, deep-set eyes, the broken-bridged nose, the wide mouth with its thin lips and broad, square chin and massive cheek-bones, to say naught of the stiff, heavy mustaches, too intensely black for unaided nature.

A stiffly starched shirt with high collar, spotted over with bulldogs, and an enormous pin glittering in its front. A suit of plaid, both large and "loud," the coat tightly buttoned and barely reaching the hips, the trousers fitting tightly to the bow-legs which ended in shining boots with broad flat heels and turn-up toes.

This specimen "tough" languidly turned his head far enough for his eyes to catch a glimpse of the now bowing, obsequious barkeeper out of their corners, and drawled:

"Lyin' ag'in, Danny. Give the gent what his heart craves fer. Tell the gent you was only funnin'. Or—tell me Mose Sawyer lies!"

Dan Nipperley laughed and bowed and hustled around after his most active fashion, and almost before that worthy could comprehend what had wrought this wondrous change, a bottle and

glass were standing before him and the surly barkeeper was almost begging him to drink.

"Drink hearty, pardner," nodded the tough, taking possession of the bottle after filling a glass for the hunchback. "It's the Droop-eared Daisy's treat this time. Gents, to the bar!"

It is only following the general rule of those who had the exquisite pleasure of "Lop-eared Mose's" acquaintance, that one peculiar feature of his person had been left until now for mention. Moses was very touchy on that point, and woe be unto the luckless individual who dared even hint at his sacred appendages without waiting for the ice to be broken by their owner.

His ears were enormous, and curved over at the top so decidedly that they stood out at right angles with his skull, thus readily suggesting a nickname which was, at the time treated of, only too well known in Denver and other Western towns.

Without an exception the inmates of the room stepped up to the bar and called for the liquor each preferred, Dan Nipperley serving them with his broadest smiles, though in his heart he was savagely cursing Humpty Dick. For it was about an even thing whether or no Lop-eared Mose ever deigned to pay for the liquor. If not voluntarily, Dan might as well charge it to profit and loss; it would be cheaper in the end than an attempt to collect the bill.

Lop-eared Mose was keenly though covertly watching the deformed drunkard, his interest growing with each moment, though he might have been puzzled to explain just why this should be the case. His action had found birth in a lazy desire to show his power over a tough case like Dan Nipperley, but now—

A red light shot into his little eyes and stepping forward he thrust one hand under the dwarf's chin, pushing his head back until the light of the lamps fell fairly athwart his face.

"Hellow, old mate! It's your face, but durn the body! What's squatted ye down so? You air my old pard, Sterling Coin?"

A strong contrast they presented. Humpty Dick was justly named, for his back and shoulders were much the "biggest part of him." He was curiously deformed, his spine being twisted until it nearly formed a letter S. This forced his head forward so that his face was kept at a sharp angle with the floor. His arms were long, and when pendent were capable of tying his shoe strings without the bending of his body.

His skin was dark and deeply lined, where left visible by the matted growth of hair and beard, now white and black in curious streaks. His garb was a strange blending of rags and skins, held together by bits of wood and thongs.

Who he was, or from whence he came, few if any, in Denver could have satisfactorily explained. For weeks and months no one would see him in the saloons where, if at all, he was to be found. Then Humpty Dick would put in an appearance with gold in plenty, and at once proceeded to "enjoy himself." This he did after a certain fashion. He cared only for drink. He would take in a dozen saloons in the course of a day, at each one drinking heavily and treating everybody who cared to join him. Only in his eyes and loosened tongue would he show the effects of his heavy draughts, for mortal man never saw him when he could not walk as steadily as though liquor never passed his lips. And as long as he had a dollar left, he would refuse to drink at another's expense. The round completed, he would begin over again, to keep this up until, as now, he could no longer obtain credit even for a single drink. Then, with "the man with the poker" close at his heels, Humpty Dick would melt away to be seen no more until he was "well heeled" again with gold.

At first men would try to dog him to his retreat, believing the deformed had "struck it rich" somewhere among the hills, but as often would they return, having been thrown off the track. And at last, despite the vague boastings of Humpty Dick while deepest in his cups, of his enormous riches, of his untold thousands safely hidden away, of his golden secrets, all such efforts were abandoned. Humpty Dick was set down as a harmless crank, whose riches existed only in his mind. And one wit dubbed him "The Beggar-millionaire," which title still clung to the poor fellow.

Humpty Dick shrunk away from that rude grasp with a shiver of fear which was intensified in his dark eyes. Huskily he gasped:

"Don't—spare me! mercy, for—"

"Don't you know your old pard, Sterling?" persisted Sawyer.

Humpty Dick passed one hand over his eyes, then laughed faintly.

"It's a good joke, ain't it? A good joke—but I'm only Humpty Dick, and so turribly dry! Perishing for a drop of whisky, and with a golden secret here—here!" tapping his sunken chest with his claw-like fingers as his black eyes glittered with sudden fire. "Perishing from thirst, and yet able to buy the whole town without missing the price from my store! But it's all mine, now, though I was only to have one-fourth! All mine—all mine—and enough for a thousand!"

His tones sunk into low mutterings as he slunk away from the bar, his hand still fum-

bling at his bosom. Was that the faint sound of crackling paper?

Lop-eared Mose believed it was.

He turned to the bar and paid for the drinks, then with good-humored bluntness drew Humpty Dick's hand through his arm and led him toward the door.

"We'll take a walk, pardner. I know whar we kin git heap better lush than what Pizen Dan keeps on tap. I'm on it to-night, bigger'n a wild wolf, an' you want to stay with me—eh, ole pard?"

Humpty Dick hung back a little as they crossed the threshold, but Lop-eared Mose tightened his grip and moved along without pausing. He believed himself on the point of a wonderful discovery, and wanted time to think as well as a better place for solving his doubts.

He knew that his sudden ejaculation, his pronouncing that name, together with the peculiar affright betrayed by Humpty Dick, had attracted the notice of several of the men in Dan Nipperley's saloon. They were none of them his particular cronies, and if anything should happen, they might talk too much were he foolish enough to fully awaken their curiosity.

"I don't think—it's time I was going home," muttered Humpty Dick, making a feeble effort to free his hand. "He'll be looking for me by this time. He'll be coming after me, sure!"

"Your pard, I reckon? Mebbe I know him? What name did you say?"

Humpty Dick freed his hand with a jerk, and as he turned upon his companion, Lop-eared Mose caught a gleam as of bare steel amid the rags that covered the sunken chest.

"Speak it, and I'll split your heart in halves!" grated the hunchback, with an intensity that for an instant chilled the blood of the burly rough. "They'd hunt him down to death!—they'd hang him like a dog! But not while I live—not while I'm thirsty—so dry! My throat is parched until it cracks. And I'm rich—rich enough to buy out all Denver and never miss the amount, though I made a bonfire out of all the houses; Rich! and it's all mine now. All mine, though they said my share was only one-fourth! Rich! and not a drop to cool my poor throat!"

"Not a drop, pard, but I'll kick in the head of a bar'an' you kin jump into it up to your chin, ef you like," laughed Lop-eared Mose, once more taking the Beggar-millionaire by the arm and hurrying along the dimly lighted street, heading for a saloon where he felt confident he would meet with some tried and true comrades in evil.

His belief that he had unexpectedly stumbled across a bonanza was rapidly gaining strength, but he wanted time to study the puzzling enigma out before making any decisive move. He was ready enough to use violence, to shed blood, if needs be, but it was just as well to be sure the reward would pay for the risk and trouble.

Lop-eared Mose was not out in his calculations, for as they entered another saloon, of a still lower class than that kept by Dan Nipperley, if possible, he recognized three boon companions seated at a table near the rear of the smoke-filled room. Only an almost imperceptible nod acknowledged their greeting, and they instantly took the cue. If they watched the movements of their chief, it was so covertly as to attract no attention from outsiders.

Lop-eared Mose provided Humpty Dick with whisky, seating him at a little table in one corner, himself returning to the bar as though to give further orders, but in reality to scan the face and figure of the deformed, trying hard to reconcile the immense difference between that twisted, awry figure and the one he had known in the days long gone by.

It seemed almost impossible, but surely that was the face—older and more marked, but still the same features—of Sterling Coin? And then, those few words he had dropped. Might not some accident have twisted and warped that tall, lithe shape?

Humpty Dick finished his liquor, and seemingly forgetting his late companion, rose and crept out of the saloon. Lop-eared Mose gave his three fellows the wink, and followed after. He kept an eye on the deformed as he moved through the night, muttering to his men:

"Follow, but not too close. I may need you."

"Not him?" incredulously asked one of the party.

"It's only Humpty Dick, an' he ain't got a 'color' about him, or he wouldn't be leavin' a saloon so airy!" added another.

"If not dust, he's got just as good hidden in his rags," a little roughly returned Lop-eared Mose.

"Ef you take his say-so," laughed the third rough, at the same time prudently taking a step backward out of reach of the heavy fist which he saw closing significantly. "Lord, mate, you're too long from Denver fer to know the crooked little cuss as well as we do. He kin blow wuss then a thunder-gust 'bout his heaps o' gold hid away, but it ain't no more'n wind. We've made sure o' that, ain't we, pards?"

"That's what!"

"Slide off, then, durn ye!" savagely growled the Droop-eared Daisy, with a significant ges-

ture that needed no interpretation. "I kin work the racket my own self. But don't come sneakin' 'round me fer—"

"Tain't that, Mose," quickly interposed one of the party, though still keeping at a respectful distance from that dreaded fist. "We're willin' to do all you say, but we didn't want you to go into a job with both eyes shet. Humpy Dick is—"

"More wu'th then you think, mebbe," and Mose nodded decisively. "I knowed him afore I did you, heap time ago. I know he's got what'll be wuth money to us all, an' that some-thin' I'm goin' to hev if I hev to punch his ticket fer over the divide!"

"Ef you say so, boss."

"Shell we give him the nipper?" added another, crooking his arm meaningly as they silently stole along the deserted street.

"Not ef I kin git at the goody easier," was the brief reply. "You jest keep an eye open, an' come up only ef I give the word."

During this bit of by-play, Humpy Dick had passed by two saloons without even glancing in at their open doors as he passed along. His steps were quickened, and there was something in his manner that spoke of a well-defined purpose. Lop-eared Mose recalled his mention of an expected friend, and fearing to lose further time, he strode on and soon overtook his intended victim with a cheerful laugh:

"Think to give your old pard the dirty shake, did ye, Humpy? Was that right white, think? Was it the way you'd like to treat a critter who's in a strange place, with never another pard to help him git away with a few bottles o' pure bug-juice sech as you don't run acrost twice in a lifetime? An' I've got that very same, Humpy, lad! Got it in a snug little room whar we kin drink until we're stone blind, an' then go to bed with our boots on, ef we like! How's that, pard?"

Contrary to his expectation, Humpy Dick resisted his grasp.

"Not now—the time's come for me to go back. He'll be looking and wondering why I stay so long. He'll begin to frown and his face will grow darker, his eyes will glitter with the terrible light, and he'll think something has happened—think the evil demons have done harm to Humpy—and he'll come here to punish them. They'll see him—the bloodhounds'll see him and try to drag him away to the rope! They couldn't do it, but he might get hurt while choking the life out of them. I must go, I tell you! He's looking for me now!"

"They's room fer him too, pard," lightly laughed Moses, though he cast a swift, apprehensive glance around them as though expecting to catch a glimpse of this mysterious friend.

He saw only his own allies, skulking along in the dense shadows cast by a line of dingy, lightless houses.

Humpy Dick shook his head, pressing on in the direction of the open country beyond the limits of the city.

"Time's come—he'll be looking for me," he muttered, evidently with but that one thought in his poor brain just then. "He'll look for me, and they'll hang him like a dog!"

"We won't let 'em do it, pard. I'm a chief, myself, an' they ain't nobody in this burg as'll look crooked at your fri'nd. I know him like a book, an' come to think of it, I do reckon he's back thar at my room waitin' fer us both! I jest knows he is! Le's go see ef—"

But Humpy Dick shook his head positively.

"You don't know him, and I'll not tell you. He has no friends but poor me—poor? It's a lie!" with a pitiful fierceness, as he drew his crooked figure more nearly erect. "I'm rich—rich enough to buy a dozen towns each one double the size of Denver! I know where there is gold enough to fill a train of freight cars, and it's all mine—all mine, now!"

"Ef you don't fergit whar you've hid it, pard," ventured Mose, his eyes keenly alert. "I did once. Made a big cache, an' trusted to mem'ry fer findin' it when I wanted. Durned fool me fer not puttin' of it down on paper in good black ink! Don't you be no sech fool, pard!"

Humpy Dick laughed softly, one hand stealing up to his breast, to fumble and fondle as though caressing a treasure. Lop-eared Mose caught his breath quickly, his little eyes glowing redly. He believed that his first suspicions were correct. That Humpy Dick really held the clew to a long lost cache, and that he carried the clew about with him—that it was hidden in his bosom at that very instant.

If the idiot would only listen to reason! If that powerful thirst for liquor would only return again!

But apparently it was dead. Humpy Dick positively declined to yield to the adroit pictures of drunken bliss as drawn by Moses, all the time pressing on toward the level sandy waste encircling the Pearl of the Desert. And then, with more frequent glances about him, the desperado resolved to gain his ends at all risks.

"Waal, ef you won't, you won't, an' that settles it, Humpy," he said in a tone of off-hand good-humor. "It's a durned shame, all the same, to make a pore critter git drunk all by his lonesome self! Think better of it, pard. Come an' jest take one smell o' the honey-dew, an'

then ef you don't like the flavor, I'll say never a word ag'inst your goin' on home this very night."

"It's time—he'll be looking for me," was the old tune, as the deformed cast a swift, almost apprehensive glance about him. "He's already looking! I can feel his presence, and I must—"

Lop-eared Mose was also glancing about them, and seeing nothing, he resolved to waste no more time, but made a quick grasp at the bosom of the cripple, crying excitedly:

"Look out, pard! Thar's a centipede crawlin' in—"

He tore open the rags that covered the sunken chest, but before he could do or say more, Humpy Dick gave a shrill yell of angry fright, jumping aside with a force sufficient to tear himself from that grasp.

"Hands off! you shall not tear my treasure away! It has cost blood enough—don't make me—Robbery! murder!"

With a savage curse Lop-eared Mose leaped after his intended victim, murder in his redly-glowing eyes. As nimbly Humpy Dick avoided his first rush, his right hand lifting to his bosom and then shooting out with a bared blade glimmering in the moonlight.

The same light was shining on the face of the desperado, and it was what he saw imprinted on those rugged features that led Humpy Dick to send forth those thrilling cries on the night air.

"Dry up, cuss ye fer a howlin' imp!" grated Lop-eared Mose as he leaped upon the cripple, his sinewy fingers itching to grasp his throat and stifle those yells, even though murder should follow. "I don't mean ye no harm, but ef—Satan burn ye alive! I've got it, hard!"

Viciously Humpy Dick thrust out his long arm, and the keen steel made itself felt as Lop-eared Mose sought to twist his body out of line. And believing himself death-stricken, he reeled back, dizzily.

Yet he saw Humpy Dick, apparently forgetting his fears in a sudden lust for blood, crouching as though for a final leap and attack. He fought off that sickening sensation, and cried out savagely:

"Down him, lads! Shut off his wind, ef you cain't—"

This was a waste of breath, as it proved. The three roughs, though evidently convinced their chief was for once "seeking wool in a hog-pen," were still too true to him to hang back when the moment came for prompt action. At the first move made by Lop-eared Mose, they left their cover and ran forward to play their part in the game, and before Humpy Dick could follow up his attack, they pounced upon him, crushing him to the earth despite his furious struggles.

Twice he struck out savagely with his armed hand, feeling the steel enter flesh, only to have the blade torn from his grasp and hard, sickening blows come thick and fast upon his head and body. Fainter grew his struggles, and less distinct his cries of murder, until—

"Let up, you infernal scoundrels! Would you murder the poor devil?" came a clear, ringing shout, as a man leaped toward the scene.

CHAPTER II.

BREAKERS ALL AROUND.

"It can do no good. It will only make it harder for us both to bear, Rex. It must be—there is no other way."

With a desperate calmness the words were uttered, but even then the girl dust not, could not lift her eyes to meet the burning gaze which she felt was fixed upon her pale face.

"Harder, for me—but you, precious?"

Even as the words passed his lips Rex Stuart would have recalled them, for he felt rather than saw the bitter pain they gave, or rather the tone in which they were uttered. Precious Wingfold sunk back in the buggy seat, covering her face with her little gloved hands for a moment. Then, with a sound that was almost a sob, she turned toward her hot-blooded lover.

"Harder than death for me, Rex, though there is a sneer in your voice as you ask the question! Oh, Rex! surely it is bitter enough for me, without your scorn and angry suspicion?"

"It was an almost deserted suburb of the city through which they were slowly riding, and the full moon was just then passing beneath a fleecy cloud. Rex Stuart begged forgiveness, as only a lover knows how.

Indeed it was hard, as they both knew, and little wonder that Rex Stuart, young, hot-blooded, strong and passionate by nature, almost fiercely rebelled against submission.

Two years ago he first met Precious Wingfold, only child of Maurice Wingfold, at that date a somewhat noted character in the financial circles of Denver. Not that he was so very wealthy, though many gave him credit for a snug fortune, still more snugly invested where it was safe enough from any wave of speculation; rather from the very audacity of his operations, plunging blindly in where much heavier ballasted speculators dared not tread, even on tiptoe. And not alone for that, if the whole truth is to be told.

Some said there was "a screw loose" in his mental machinery. Some that he had never fairly recovered from the bite of the "gold

snake" of the time that gave birth to Denver when the "Cherry Creek" fever was at its height. Some would wink and nod and whisper vaguely of a dark and tragic episode of those early days, the ghosts of which were driving Maurice Wingfold on and on to his utter ruin, and still more vague hints floated around of a mysterious treasure, of a lost cache, of an enormous fortune which Maurice Wingfold had sworn should be his though he spent every dollar and every day of his life in gaining it.

All this Rex Stuart heard, more or less distinctly, in those first days of love—for his was one of those not fabulous cases of "love at first sight."

He had returned to Denver from an extended prospecting trip in the distant mountains. He had made barely sufficient to refit and pass a few days in idleness, and it had been his intention to at once procure his necessities and turn again to the rugged hills where he felt a fortune was awaiting his efforts.

He saw her first on the night he attended the play at the Music Hall—this was before the Governor of the State gave to his pet city the magnificent Opera House that now bears his name—to kill an evening and smile at the ambitious efforts of a native bard who sought popular favor by painting in gorgeous colors the career of a "poor but honest" prospector.

Fate placed Rex Stuart directly behind the seat occupied by Precious Wingfold and a lady friend, and it was her subdued but burning speeches that changed the prospector into a clerk. Only one who had suffered bitterly through the mad, peculiar, yet ever-bright delusions of the prospector, could have uttered those comments. And when the fair maiden, all unconscious how breathlessly the tall, athletic, handsome stranger was drinking in her words, affirmed that no woman who was made of more earthly qualities than a saint or a martyr, should ever link her life and fortunes with those of a gold-hunter, Rex Stuart finally relinquished his long-cherished dreams of "a rich strike."

Within a week he had learned the name and situation in life of his fate. She was unmarried, heart-free for all the world could say. She was an only child, and with her father lived alone in a modest, yet commodious house a little removed from the business portion of the city.

He also learned of a cousin to Maurice Wingfold, also a widower with a single child, a son some years older than Precious. And at the same time he learned that apparently there was little love lost between the two families. If not actual enemies, the men were certainly not friends.

Through a friend who had known his family in the days before Cherry Creek set the world afire, Rex Stuart not only secured a comfortable situation in one of the banks, but was introduced to Maurice Wingfold and his daughter. Though the tall, thin, nervous acting speculator never gave him much encouragement, Rex was by far too deeply in love to be abashed by silent hints, even though they came from the parent of his idol, and then—

Maurice Wingfold growled and frowned and snapped his disapproval when the lovers went to him and told their happy agreement, which only lacked his approval. Ungraciously though it came, this was given them in the end, for Maurice Wingfold loved Precious far more than he loved all the world besides—after his own hard, selfish nature.

She was too young to marry, he said, and they must wait. Rex found that waiting very hard, but Precious shyly laughed him into good humor again, and then—then—

It was the old sweet story. Their love was as genuine and pure as it was earnest, and they were content with seeing each other every evening, content to wait until the time should come as set by the father. But then, clouds began to make their appearance.

Rex Stuart had heard of the periodical vanishments of the speculator, and knew that he had remained in town much longer than usual this time. He could guess the reason. Matters were going rough with Maurice Wingfold, and he was losing rather than making money.

It was just at this juncture that Rex Stuart was sent on important business to Chicago, connected with the bank. A successful mission promised him promotion and an increase of salary, and it was with a light heart that he bid Precious good-by. He did succeed, and he lost very few moments after his return before he sought out his loved one.

Only to be refused admittance! To have the door closed in his face, after being told that Miss Wingfold could see no one.

After he recovered from his surprise, he returned and forced his way into the house, demanding an interview with Precious Wingfold. She came, sobbing, pale, worn, but little better than the ghost of her usual self. With her came Maurice Wingfold, even more altered in outward appearance, and seeming like a man just risen from his grave. And though he lay back in his chair through all that stormy interview, shivering, starting at every sound from without, Maurice Wingfold would permit no promise of a future meeting, would only say that all was at

an end between the lovers from that moment on. He would give no reason for the sudden change. It was so to be, and no argument could change his mind.

Rex Stuart left the house, hardly conscious of his actions. But with time came cooler reasoning, and the result was to be seen on this evening, when Precious Wingfold stole from her home and met him for a ride through the pleasant evening, where they could talk without fear of being watched or eavesdropped.

But even now the talking was almost altogether on his side. He learned that never before had Precious Wingfold loved him more wholly and sincerely, but still she told him that their fond hopes could never be realized. And only bitter, silent tears answered his queries as to what terrible thing had come between them.

And then, something which he had until now driven from his mind as worse than ungenerous, came back to the lover.

He had time and again seen Damon Wingfold call at the house of his cousin, sometimes accompanied by his hopeful son, Earl; at others alone. And until the past two weeks, he knew that no communication had been held between the cousins. What more natural than to connect the two? What more natural than to believe the cousins had made up their past differences, and resolved to cement them by wedding their heirs?

It was this maddening suspicion that led to his putting that pointed question; but when Precious gazed into his eyes with tears in her own dark, lustrous orbs, he felt guilty as miserable.

"If you know how nearly crazy I am, Precious, you wouldn't blame me for speaking harshly," he muttered, as a dark figure flitted across the street ahead of their horse. "I came back so full of joy and triumph! The future looked so bright before us! I would not have changed places with any man on the footstool, then! And what was it I came back to? What was my greeting when I hastened to you, my promised wife?"

"I knew nothing of it until the next day, Rex," was the sobbing response. "I only learned by accident that you had called."

"But when I forced my way into the house—when I did see you—how much better was it?" he muttered, almost savagely.

A little hand clasped his wrist, dark, tearful eyes looked into his with a pitiful pleading, an unsteady voice uttered:

"Do you think it was my choice, Rex?"

"I don't think—I can't think! I only know that you sat in silence while your father forbade me the house. I only know that you only hid your face and sobbed when I begged you to come to me, as you once promised, to give me the right to protect and cherish and care for you before the whole world. And I know that I had to go away without one cheering word from your lips. And knowing this, Precious, what could I think? What am I to think?"

"Anything save that you are less dear to my heart now than you were on that evening when you first whispered your love in my ears," passionately murmured the maiden, her dark eyes flashing with sudden fire as she frankly met his puzzled gaze.

"And yet you say that we must never meet again!"

Her eyes drooped, her figure sunk back, her voice came lower, sadder, but still firmly:

"It is better so, Rex. Our dream is but a dream. We can never be more to each other than we are at this moment."

"I must know *why* you think this, Precious," he responded, his tones low and firm. "You say you still love me, yet in the same breath you declare that we must never meet again. Give me your reasons, and I can answer you better than I can now, when all is a miserable puzzle."

She sat in silence. He could feel her figure quivering with suppressed agitation, though her sobs were inaudible.

"If not from your lips, Precious, I must learn all from those of your father," he added, still holding his mad emotions under check.

A gasping cry escaped her lips.

"Not of him—he is so ill—so weak and broken down by the horrible weight of— Rex, will you not take my solemn pledge that there is a barrier between us which not even love can tear down?"

"I will take nothing but a full explanation, Precious," he replied, though his tones grew softer as he realized how great a trial she was undergoing. "It is my right. It is only fair to you. If I took your vague speech for final, the time might come when I would learn to misjudge you. For your sake, I again ask you to tell me everything."

Another brief silence, during which he could feel that Precious Wingfold was nerving herself for the ordeal. Then she spoke:

"You are right, Rex. You must know all—all I can tell you."

"For your sake, even more than my own, Precious."

"It is very hard to put into words. My poor brain has been so confused and bewildered, that I cannot clearly understand it all. I only know that father has got into trouble about some money, and that uncle Damon is at the bottom of it."

"Uncle Damon? Not cousin Earl?" quickly asked Rex, that vague jealousy leaping into sudden life and activity.

"Both, I may say," came the answer, in a less steady tone, "though it is uncle against whom father is the most bitter, and who is pressing him to the wall. Just why, or just how, I cannot even guess. I only know what father told me that day, after you went away—that unless he could raise thirty thousand dollars before the last day of this month he was ruined."

"Only that?" and there was an echo of intense relief in the voice of the young man as one arm stole around her trim waist. "I am strong and smart enough to work for you both, Precious—work so hard and successfully that even your father need not feel hampered, much less ruined! Bah! if there is nothing worse behind—"

"But I thought you were poor, Rex?" with a sudden hope. "I never once imagined you could raise so large a sum in so brief a time."

"Nor can I, Precious," he replied, more quietly. "But I can keep my wife and her father in comfort, if not in affluence, until his talents win back his property. Why, pet, that very property will bring more than the amount you name, even at a forced sale."

She shook her head sadly.

"It is all gone. Mortgaged, or sold—I don't know just how, but it is no longer ours. And unless that amount is raised before the month expires—oh, Rex!" and her enforced composure again gave way. "Only this evening he told me—with such a terrible light in his poor eyes!—that unless he found the money he would never live to see the date expire. And—I saw in his eyes—"

Sobs choked her voice, but it was easy enough to complete the broken sentence. Rex Stuart knew enough of Maurice Wingfold to feel sure he had the grit to end his own life, provided the emergency was as serious as Precious evidently believed.

But was it? Was it not a cunning trick to separate them, through the love of this poor child?

He thought of gay, reckless, dashing, profligate Earl Wingfold, his father's idol, and grated his teeth viciously.

"Damon Wingfold is your father's creditor, then?" he asked.

"Have I not said enough, dear Rex?" faltered the poor girl, flinching from the ordeal.

"Not while a single cloud remains between us, Precious," was the firm, almost dogged response. "If I am to be of any service, I must know everything. Surely, you have nothing to—"

He choked back the word, but his meaning was already too clear. It cut to her very heart, but she was a true woman, and she loved him with a perfect faith. Perhaps it was just as well, after all, for it lent her the courage she so sorely needed.

"From you, Rex?" and she smiled faintly through her tears.

He began a muttered apology, but she gently touched his lips with one gloved hand.

"It is only natural. A man sees so much more of the world than a girl does. And you have been treated so shamefully, too!"

Again he attempted to speak, and again she checked him.

"Let me speak while I have the courage, Rex. It may fail me again, and I cannot remain out much longer. I left poor father lying very low—in a stupor that terribly resembled death. If he *should* die!"

"He will not die, Precious. He will live many long years yet."

Faint and indefinite consolation, but it served its purpose and checked the coming burst of hysteria, lending the maiden strength to continue:

"It was only last night that I learned the worst, Rex. Uncle Damon was there, and he spoke plainly—too plainly!"

"Offered to cancel the debt, provided you would wed his hopeful son, I suppose?" sharply muttered Stuart, his handsome face flushing hotly, his teeth snapping together, his big blue eyes gleaming.

"If I would consent, he would place the money in my hands the moment the ceremony was complete, to use as I saw fit," slowly uttered Precious Wingfold, each word issuing with difficulty.

Her lover was silent. He had anticipated just such an answer, and he dared not trust his voice just then. With a savage jerk of the lines and vicious cut of the whip, he sent the good horse trotting on at full speed, threading the deserted streets with more rapidity than discretion.

A little hand clung to his arm. Dark eyes gazed pleadingly into his hard-set countenance. He could feel Precious trembling beside him, but he could not, would not turn his gaze upon her, just then.

"What could I say, Rex?" she murmured, her voice barely audible above the muffled rumble of the wheels over the loose sand. "He is my father. I am all he has to love and cherish in this world. If I were to desert him in this hour of terrible trial, what would be his fate?"

Still silence, though those strong hands were steadily quelling the fright they had awakened

in the good horse. Softer, still more tremulous, more pleading, came that gentle voice:

"He is old and almost broken down with grief and pain. He has not asked me to make the sacrifice. He only lies and moans painfully in that awful stupor. He knows he cannot raise the money. He swears he will not live to meet disgrace—and worse! Oh, Rex! that awful man told me to choose between an honest husband and a *hung father*!"

Rex Stuart turned toward her at these words, but her face was now hidden in her hands. Evidently she fully believed this all.

"Debt is no hanging matter, Precious," he said, softly, wishing to console her, but still feeling his own wrongs the most keenly. "Damon Wingfold, even though he be your uncle, is a scoundrel to the very core, and would sooner lie than tell the truth, even where naught was to be gained by so doing. He is trying to scare you into a marriage with that drinking, blustering bully, his son. But it shall never be while I draw the breath of life! I'll kill them both first!"

It was a lucky speech for the sorely-shaken girl, for, as it bade fair to endanger her real love, it lent her courage and strength to face him again and banish all such mad thoughts.

"Not even *that* would save poor father," she said, brushing away her tears and speaking firmly, almost coldly. "You must not even dream of such a terrible thing, Rex!"

"Then let them keep out of the way," doggedly. "You have promised to marry me. Your father gave his consent, and even named the day on which we might wed. No one or two men shall come between us now, or I will fight them, and fight to the bitter end!"

"Even if I go against you, Rex?"

"What do you mean by that, Precious?"

She did not answer him immediately. The words that rose to her lips were terribly hard to speak, and had she been less miserable, had her feelings been less highly wrought, she could not have uttered them.

"It must be, Rex," she said slowly, painfully.

"Unless father can raise that money before the last week in this month, I will raise it for him. *I must!* He is my father. It is my solemn duty to save him, now that he is so old and weak and miserably broken down."

"You will marry Earl Wingfold, Precious?" slowly asked Stuart.

"To save my poor father from the rope, I *must!*"

"You told your uncle as much, I suppose?"

She shook her head quickly.

"I could not say the words, though I did try. He understood me, I think, for he went away smiling—the evil wretch!"

Great as was his chagrin and pain, Stuart could hardly keep from smiling at this truly feminine outburst. It was so intense, so earnest.

Now that the worst had been said, Precious Wingfold, still loving this stalwart, handsome young man as not every woman is capable of loving, felt a wish to comfort him in his misery; and so feeling, she received renewed strength and composure.

"You are young, and will soon learn to forget such a poor, silly girl, Rex. You have all the world before you, and in time you will find one to love and cherish and—"

"I have found her, Precious," was the quiet reply, as one strong arm stole around her, drawing her unresistingly to his bosom, as the good horse came to a stand-still, most conveniently.

A sobbing cry escaped her lips, and the tremor which ran through her yielding form told him plainer than words how wholly she was his in heart, if never to become his in person. And in that moment every ghost of doubt and jealousy fled forever from his mind. Never again would he doubt her, even though circumstances appeared more black than those of the past few days.

"You are mine, Precious, and not all the rascals in the world can take you from me. I am sorry for your father. I will do all that lies in my power to get him through this cloud; but not even he can take my promised wife from me!"

"It must be, Rex!" and she faintly sought to free herself.

"It will be—precisely as I have sworn, dearest," with a low, glad laugh. "Something will turn up to foil that old vulture and his hopeful son. If not—I'll turn it up, and them with it, sure!"

"If the old dream could only prove true! If the golden phantom which poor father has chased so long and vainly *might* prove a reality!" murmured Precious, no longer trying to shrink away, a dreamy bliss stealing over her and soothing her poor, overtaken brain.

"It may—who knows? And I may be the very one to run the phantom down!" he laughed lightly, but with an undercurrent of earnestness in his speech. "I have heard something about it, but I'd like to know more. There may be a—"

"Robbery! Murder!" came floating through the night, from just around the corner, where the scattered houses stood dark and deserted.

Breathlessly they listened, catching the sounds of a confused struggle, of curses and fiercely uttered threats, of trampling feet and heavy blows. And then—

"Down him, lads! Kill the cuss, ef you cain't—"

Again that thrilling cry of murder! the most awful that can break on an unprepared ear, particularly in the night-time.

Hot-blooded, generous, brave to a fault, Rex Stuart could not remain idle while a fellow-being was in mortal peril, and quickly tearing himself loose from the clinging arms of his starved love, he leaped from the buggy, hastily uttering:

"Turn about and drive straight home, darling! I will be there almost as soon as you are."

"Rex! they will murder you!" gasped the maiden, forgetting all else in her fears for this loved one—never dearer than when she had resolved to sacrifice him on the altar of duty.

"It's only a drunken row," hurriedly replied Rex, glancing over his shoulder, pausing after one bound toward the unseen conflict. "I'll run no risks. Go—or I'll beat you home even yet!"

Used to her meek obedience ever since their betrothal, he never once dreamed of her disobeying his repeated commands now, and as that cry for help again rose on the air, now sounding faint and muffled, he leaped around the corner with an indignant shout that instantly drew the notice of the assassins upon him.

And then, with a dash and vigor that bade fair to carry all before it, Rex Stuart leaped into the fight, striking out with his long arms and hard fists, sending a man to the right and another to the left, before either could put up a guard or attempt to dodge his blows. But the third, with a savage curse, crouched and leaped aside, only to jump forward with a gleaming blade grasped in his right hand, striking viciously at the side of his enemy.

Only a cat-like twist of his body saved Rex Stuart from instant death. As it was, he felt the keen steel grating along his ribs, and a sharp, biting pain shoot through his entire being.

For the moment he believed himself mortally wounded, and he felt that mad, burning lust for revenge which will come over a man under such circumstances. He forgot all else, and leaped upon the ruffian, gripping his armed hand, and sending the steel flying far away. One heavy blow, and the fellow reeled back, blinded, gasping, helpless for the moment. And just as this happened, Rex Stuart caught sight of a trim, graceful figure springing to his side, and heard the words:

"Together Rex, living or dead! Together, my love, my king!"

Instinctively he caught her form on his arm, even then hardly realizing that Precious Wingfold had risked her life to join him. But his eyes were soon opened. The ruffians were crowding toward him. Others were rushing out from the shadows, and Lop-eared Mose gratingly cried:

"Down 'em all, lads! Cut thar hearts out! No crawfish now!"

CHAPTER III.

DARK DURG, THE ISHMAELITE.

FOR the first time since he had attained manhood's estate, Rex Stuart trembled with fear; but it was not for himself.

He saw Lop-eared Mose moving toward them with drawn weapon. He saw two of those whom his heavy fist had sent reeling away from their still prostrate victim, recovering themselves and making ready to obey the vicious command of their leader. And with the swift, anxious glance which he cast around, he caught vague glimpses of dark figures stealing out of the shadows beyond, silently closing in on them all. And something told him he had little to hope for from that quarter.

If honest men, surely they would come with a different air? And unless common report greatly maligned that quarter of the city, precious few honest men were to be found, save by chance in that quarter.

For a single breath he thought of turning in flight, supporting the maiden on his strong arm, but as though anticipating this, one of the enemy made a rapid flank movement, thus penning them in. To make such an attempt would only bring three enemies upon his back while engaged with the one in front.

If only Precious was beyond danger!

"Run, darling!" he hastily breathed, freeing his arm from her clinging grasp with a slight movement in the direction of the deserted buggy. "Run, for your life! I'll keep you covered, and—"

"With you, Rex!"

Even in that critical moment the lover felt a delicious thrill as he caught that brief, fervent response. No doubt, no fear, no half-way promise there! Love, pure and simple, yet stronger than even the fear of death.

Another glance, and he knew that the one frail hope of escape by flight was gone. They were surrounded by enemies who each grasped a bared knife, each crouching in readiness to leap upon them, only waiting until the thin, fleecy cloud which was then passing over the moon should pass away sufficiently to show them what

weapons they would have to encounter in his hands.

Only those furnished by nature, fortunately for themselves.

Lop-eared Mose cast a swift, keen glance around them. He saw a dozen dark shapes moving irresolutely about, and his ready wit furnished his tongue with a cunning safeguard.

"Down the critter, lads! He slugged a man—I see'd him goin' through his pockets! Down him—fer justice!"

Let him still that tongue, and who would dare accuse him of doing wrong on that night? Who could say that Humpy Dick met death at his hands? And with a lower, more vicious snarl, he added:

"Shot his wind, boys! Clean work, an' we're all hunky!"

He leaped forward, but with an eye single for Humpy Dick who still lay prostrate on the ground, for he felt that, hampered as he must be by the girl, that audacious youngster would fall an easy prey to the trio of stout fellows whom he urged on. Leaped forward, only to stagger and reel back with a gasping, gurgling curse, as a red tongue of fire shot out from that deformed heap, a sharp report rending the night air!

Rex Stuart, unarmed save with his ready fists, shook Precious from his arm and sprang forward to meet the enemy before their weapons could come near enough to endanger her life. But, even as he warded off a vicious thrust, there came a rush and a flashing of steel.

A tall form brushed past him. A strong hand turned aside the knife that was quivering in its descent upon his life. And then a rapid pass buried a long blade to the very hilt in the bosom of the foremost desperado.

A lightning recovery—another swift leap and stroke combined. And with a hollow, choking groan, another victim reeled, turned around, fingers convulsively tearing at the severed throat, to plunge headlong, dead ere his body measured its length on the sand!

Bewildered, confused, Stuart made a pass at this terrible slayer, only to have his blow warded off with a force that turned him half around. And there, prostrate and helpless as his fellows, he saw the fourth of the lawless gang!

Terrified, sick at heart, poor Precious uttered a low cry, and fell upon the neck of her betrothed. It came just in time. It recalled him to a sense of his duty to the one whom his impetuous action had put in peril, and clasping her to his bosom, he turned to hasten away from the scene of bloodshed and death, to pause as a deep, stern voice broke out:

"Steady! Lose your head now, and your life goes with it. Listen!"

Low but menacing mutterings came from the dark figures beyond, gaining strength and emphasis with the passage of each moment. And with each moment, too, the number of figures was increasing. Already one might count a score in plain view, with as many more dodging about just within the shadows cast by the buildings. Already the muttering crowd was beginning to spread out on either hand, as though to encircle the vacant lot and its occupants, living and dead.

The stranger whose silent coming had been followed by such swift and thorough execution, gave his victims not a second glance, but bent over the figure of Humpy Dick, whose head had fallen back again the moment his hand discharged the shot that foiled the murderous intention of Lop-eared Mose. A sharp sound hissed through his grating teeth, cut short by the growing sound that bade fair to only too soon burst out into a wild yell for blood.

A single glance showed him the growing danger, and then his voice checked the flight of Rex Stuart.

"Let me put her in safety, then I'll meet—"

"Swear that you'll care for this poor fellow," hurriedly interposed the stranger, rising with the form of Humpy Dick on one powerful arm, "and I'll take care of the rest. Ha!"

Rex Stuart was not listening. He had thoughts only for the safety of his loved one, and lifting her form in his arms, he was running swiftly around the corner. A cry escaped his lips as he caught sight of his good horse still standing in the middle of the street, though tossing her proud head and snorting impatiently.

"Thank Heaven! There's still a chance for you, darling!" he muttered, as he placed Precious Wingfold in the buggy.

"With you—not without, Rex! Quick! they are coming!"

The young man whirled about, his right hand ready for work, his left aiming a slap at the haunch of the mare, but he was brushed aside by the tall stranger who dropped the limp form of Humpy Dick at the feet of the maiden, hurriedly uttering:

"Take him to your home—give him Christian care, and you shall be richly repaid. Swear that you will, and I'll draw those yelping bloodhounds off your track—swear it!"

"We will—I do!" impulsively cried Precious, shivering anew as the air was rent by a shrill, savage yell for blood. "Rex, for my sake!"

"And your own, young fellow," bluntly added the stranger as he turned to the other, one strong hand pushing him nearer the buggy. "In

with you, and spare not your whip. Double if you must, but let no one track you home. I say this as much for your and her sake, as for the sake of my poor, helpless friend yonder. Give him good care, and I will repay you a thousand fold. Go—and drive for dear life!"

Even as he uttered the last words and leaped ahead, a shrill, piercing whistle broke from the lips of the stranger, quickly answered by a short whinny as a big black horse came dashing up to his side.

Without fully checking its speed, the stranger leaped into the saddle and dashed back to the corner, drawing rein with a loud, menacing shout as the foremost in the excited crowd fell precipitately back.

"Back, ye howling bloodhounds!" burst from his bearded lips as his right hand shook a revolver in the clear moonlight. "Show your teeth to me, will ye? Snap at my heels, ye curs?"

"Take him!" came a voice from the rear. "He's done bloody murder! All together—down him!"

There was a wavering, uncertain rush, but it came more from those in the rear than the ones who could the most plainly see this grim rider. And instead of flinching or turning in flight, he actually rode forward a few paces, laughing harshly as he sent a shot humming over the heads of the excited citizens.

"If wiping out a few thieves be murder, then I am guilty. It is my work, I admit. And that you may make no mistakes, I give you my name—Black Durg, the Ishmaelite!"

Those nearest the defiant speaker recoiled with low cries of mingled surprise and fear. Evidently this was not the first time that name had rung in their ears!

"Ay!" added the rider, laughing mockingly. "Black Durg—take him who can!"

A touch of his spurs sent his mighty black steed plunging fairly into the edge of the excited crowd, knocking more than one over; then, still laughing, Black Durg wheeled and sped swiftly away, taking the direction exactly opposite to that in which Rex Stuart had driven off.

While he faced them, though only one against three-score, with this number being rapidly augmented, not one among them all made any determined move toward Black Durg, as the tall rider had proclaimed himself, but the instant he turned in flight, a loud, united yell arose, and as a single man the mob tore after him, shouting savagely.

Rex Stuart heard these blending sounds, and he touched his good mare with the whip, rattling swiftly along the outskirts of the city, not yet daring to enter any of the more populous streets. Those savage sounds might come from enemies on his track, and though he would hardly have fled, with his own life at stake, fears for Precious Wingfold conquered all else.

"He has kept his word!" at length uttered the maiden, with a long breath of relief as the sounds gradually grew fainter and further off. "Only for him—oh, Rex!"

Her voice trembled and her head drooped toward his shoulder, but sweet as this might have been at any other time, Stuart knew that it might be dangerous happiness just now.

"Bear up, darling—do not give way now!" he hurriedly whispered, as he turned into a broader street. "There is still danger—there is peril until you are safely at home again. And this—I must get rid of this fellow!" he added sharply, as a faint groan broke from the bundle of humanity lying across their feet.

Precious grasped his arm quickly as he jerked up the mare.

"What do you mean to do, Rex?"

"To drop him here, until I can place you in safety. Then I'll come back and look after him."

"I promised—for you, as well as myself, Rex!"

"You first, Precious. He can wait. He's given trouble enough for one night, anyway!"

"Drive on. Take him to our house, Rex. I promised. Don't make me lie," added the maiden, pleadingly.

"Think—your father?"

"I shall tell him all, of course," more quietly. "I could not ask his permission, but I never meant to conceal this meeting from him. And it will be the surest, quickest method. The doctor is still there."

Stuart yielded, though it was with an ill grace. He feared there would trouble come of this wounded man's entrance into the home of his betrothed, though his still whirling brain could not point out just why or how.

A few minutes' brisk driving brought them to their journey's end, and reining up, Rex leaped to the walk and lifted Precious from the buggy, hurriedly uttering:

"Go in, darling. I will take him to a surgeon's where—"

"In here, Rex," with an earnestness which he could not misinterpret. "I promised, and I will be as good as my word. Only for that man, you would have perished, and I with you. It is little he asked in pay. That little I will perform, even against your advice."

"Think better of it, dear," he urged. "The whole story will get into the papers, and your

name will be connected with it. Let me have my way. I swear to see him well cared for, and—"

"Make me perjure myself?" with a trembling little laugh that had in it but scant mirth. "For my sake, Rex!"

Her hand rested on his shoulder, her pale face was upturned, her dark eyes gazing appealingly into his. He saw her quivering lips, and he could no longer resist.

"Since you will, Precious, so be it. May no harm come to you for your reward! Open the door—I will carry the fellow in."

This was quickly done, and Precious Wingfold led the way up-stairs and to her own chamber. Without a word Rex Stuart followed her, placing the deformed shape on her snowy bed, a faint groan alone telling her that life lingered in his helpless burden.

A low, startled cry came from the doorway, and, turning, they saw the white face and wide open eyes of Nettie, Precious's maid.

"The doctor is still here, Nettie?" hurriedly asked her mistress. "Bid him come here at once, but be careful not to alarm father. There has been an unfortunate accident. Hasten!"

Rex Stuart frowned a little as he watched the trim little maid glide away, and he muttered half to himself:

"She's always hard by, that cat-like little piece! It wouldn't take a great stretch of imagination to paint her as a professional spy!"

"Nettie? my paragon?" and Precious broke into a nervous laugh, the tones of which told how strongly her nerves had been tasked that evening. "I would almost as soon suspect myself of eavesdropping, Rex!"

"I may be wrong. I'm hardly accountable for what I do or say of late," he half-smiled, turning abruptly away and bending over the feebly moaning hunchback on the bed.

He saw that the unfortunate fellow bore more than one gaping wound, but before he could satisfy himself as to their depth, a brisk step echoed in the passage, and he turned to encounter Doctor Shipley, a well-known character in the history of Denver.

"An accident? Who is it? When? Where? How? My soul! he has got it—bad—mighty bad! Just so!" briskly rattled off the fat little doctor, pouncing upon the patient with true professional ardor.

"My father? He is no worse, I trust, doctor?"

"No worse. Just the same. Asked for you, though. Told him you were asleep, worn out from watching over him. White lie. Have to tell 'em sometimes. Good for our patients—purely business, you know!"

"I will go to him at once, and—"

"Right. No place for a girl here. Send me nurse, will you? Old woman. Won't be shocked at stripping a — ahem! Will you be so kind, my dear? Send—eh?" and he stared over the tops of his glasses at Rex Stuart. "I didn't see you, lad. Had to—eh? You've got it, too!"

Nothing could escape his twinkling eyes long, and with brisk eagerness he was reaching out to part the severed and bloodmarked clothes of the young man, when Rex caught his hand, pressing it warmly.

"Do your best for him, doctor. I will explain it all in a moment."

"Voice strong, eye clear, wits bright—nothing serious there!" muttered the doctor, wheeling about and again pouncing on the moaning hunchback. "All right. Talk away. I'm deaf as an adder. Young myself, once, though you mightn't think it. Bit of a heart-smasher, too! Ask Mrs. S. if you can't swallow my say so—ask her—she knows!"

Neither of the young folk paid any attention to this rumbling fusillade. A glance from those dark eyes drew Rex Stuart to the door, and Precious hurriedly whispered in his ear:

"Do not go away until I have seen you again, please."

He smiled assent. Little danger of that. He was resolved to come to a more definite understanding before leaving the house. Matters could not go on as they had for the last few days. All doubts must be dispelled, all clouds cleared away.

Leaving him, Precious Wingfold hastened to the chamber on the same floor which was occupied by her father. She found him still and seemingly sleeping, a fat old woman nodding by his bedside.

In low, guarded tones, she delivered the message from the doctor, and the nurse waddled away to play her part.

Left alone with her father, Precious bent over him, gazing tearfully into his pale, worn face. A low moan escaped his pale lips, and bending lower she dropped a kiss upon his feverish brow.

Light as was the caress, it caused his eyes to open—eyes that seemed full of overflowing with utter misery and wretchedness. Always thin and gaunt and old looking, Maurice Wingfold had aged terribly during those last few days. Not even Rex Stuart could have doubted his illness, his troubled spirit, had he seen him then.

"Poor child! it is hard—harder even for you than for me!" he muttered hoarsely, averting his eyes, with a low groan.

"There is no hope, father?" she faltered, faint-

ly, though she knew but too well what his answer must be.

"None, Precious. That devil is merciless. He has plotted and schemed for years, to succeed at last!"

"If you were only well and strong again; if you could only visit your friends to—"

A short, rasping laugh checked her speech.

"Friends? the under dog in a fight has no friends, Precious! The very ones he felt surest of, while prosperity was his, are the ones to steal the first kick at him when he falls in the mire! No, child. It is vain to fight against fate. My time has come. But I'll cheat that smirking, grinning devil yet! There's one way to foil him—and to end it all!"

"Father, if you love me!" pleaded Precious, her trembling fingers closing upon his thin hand.

She knew to what he alluded. More than once during those dark days he had hinted at taking his own life rather than suffer his half-brother to wholly triumph over him. Whether or no he fully meant all he threatened, Precious believed he would carry out his threats.

"If I love you, child?" and a sudden fire flashed into his sunken eyes as they turned toward her pale face. "If I did not love you so dearly, it would be easy enough to get out of this wretched scrape. I would only have to order your marriage with that demon's cub."

"If the worst comes, you will not have to order me, father," was the low, tremulous reply. "To save your life, I could even consent to—Oh! father, if that lost treasure would only come to light!"

"It will—it must!" and he half-started up in bed, his eyes all aglow, his thin face contorted, hectic spots coming into his cheeks. "I have sworn to find it before I die!"

Gently Precious pressed him back again, and he yielded without a struggle. That one fierce outburst apparently exhausted his feeble powers, for he almost immediately sunk into a heavy stupor.

Precious was not frightened by this. She had grown accustomed to it, and Doctor Shipley assured her that it was beneficial, rather than otherwise.

She sat down by the bedside, thinking, pondering.

That lost cache! That terribly elusive "Gold Phantom!" Thus had she dubbed it, one day, when all was bright and peaceful—when not even the faintest shadow of coming trouble was visible.

It was a page of Maurice Wingfold's past with which even she, his only child, was but imperfectly acquainted. She knew that he had, long years ago, when Denver was but a straggling collection of tents and shanties instead of the large and beautiful city it had since become, after some fashion lost a large amount of gold. Just how, he never explained to her, and she early in life learned not to question him after being once rebuked.

It was to gain funds by means of which he could prosecute his search for this mysterious treasure, this "golden phantom," that Maurice Wingfold worked so fiercely, so daringly. And it was in quest of the Gold Phantom that he so often vanished from Denver, without word or hint of where he was bound or when he might return.

For herself, Precious had long since given over all hopes of ever having the mystery solved or of seeing aught of that marvelous gold. But now—if it would only come to light! If the secret cache might be discovered in time to pay off those merciless bloodhounds! If—

Even in her utter wretchedness, Precious Wingfold smiled faintly at this wild, improbable hope. If her father had spent years in the vain search, knowing more about the matter, as he must, than any other man could hope to learn, how was Rex Stuart to succeed? It was worse than folly to for a moment dream of such a miracle!

And yet—she could not help dreaming. It seemed the only hope of escaping from the toils cunning, foxy Damon Wingfold had spun about them. Only a miracle could raise the large sum of money which he demanded. Or which some one else demanded, rather, since Damon Wingfold declared that the matter had passed entirely out of his hands, save that he knew to whom the money might be paid.

She loved Rex Stuart so wholly, so ardently! It would be worse than death to give him up! And Earl Wingfold—she hated him now, to the full as sincerely as she had despised him shortly before. A flashy bully, gambler, drunkard! To marry him—ugh!"

Just then the fat nurse came panting, puffing into the sick-chamber, and as she sunk into a chair, Precious arose, asking:

"The wounded man, nurse; he is not very seriously injured?"

Nurse shook her head until her triple chin wagged again, her husky voice making reply:

"Tain't fer me to say, mum, bein' only a pore, witless nuss. You'd better ax the doctor, mum, though I will say that ef the pore, crooked, humbly critter ever lives to see another day, it will be a mericle sech as I never hearn tell of

in all my born days an' professional igsperience, mum, so it will, mum!"

Precious bent over her father, then noiselessly drew back, saying in a guarded whisper:

"I think father is asleep, nurse. If he should rouse up and wish for me, please step to the door and call. You will not forget?"

"Bein' only a pore, witless nuss, mum, why I wouldn't like to—"

Precious waited not to hear the end, for past experience told her that the nurse, though so short-winded, could rumble on and on for a dreadful length of time, if permitted, and she was too eager to see Rex Stuart again to pause for that mountain of flesh to run down.

Apparently, her lover was to the full as eager, since she found him waiting for her without the door of the chamber in which Humpy Dick had been placed. And there was such a bright, glad glow in his blue eyes as he came forward and grasped both her hands! Surely it was more than pleasure at again meeting with her?

"The poor man? He will recover? He is not so badly hurt?" she faltered, though even as she spoke she was trying to read aright the cause of that joyous look.

Rex grew grave and his voice was sober as he made reply:

"He is badly wounded, and you must be prepared to hear the worst, my dear. If he lives, it will be little short of a miracle, the doctor says. In short—the poor fellow is mortally wounded, he fears."

Her eyes drooped, and as they fell upon his side, where the light of the hall lamp fell, she saw the severed cloth, stained dark around the edges. A gasping cry escaped her lips, and she staggered back, only to feel that strong arm wind about her, those warm lips pressed to hers, while the voice of her lover lightly whispered in her ear:

"You silly dear, it is nothing—a mere scratch. The doctor has examined it, and though he laughingly declared that a kitten could have scratched deeper without sharpening her claws, he has plastered it up. I will not know it is there in the morning, unless I look close."

Precious looked keenly into his eyes, but there were no signs of evasion there. Instead—what was it?

"A ray of hope, Precious!" laughed Rex, drawing back sufficiently to slip one hand into his bosom and withdraw a dingy, soiled and deeply creased paper. "See! a clew to a buried treasure. A guide to—The Gold Phantom—who knows? Stranger things have happened."

Precious took the paper, gazing bewilderedly at the maze of lines and dots with which one side was covered. On the other was a name:

"STERLING COIN."

CHAPTER IV.

A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK.

"It's working, my boy! The hook's deep in his jaw, and the more he fights against the strain the quicker and surer the end will come!"

"If something don't break!"

The first speaker chuckled grimly, rubbing his bony hands together until the rasping of the skin was distinctly audible. His little gray eyes sparkled and skipped, his thin lips curled away until his uneven, yellowish teeth were laid bare. Not a pleasant smile, hardly an agreeable picture did "Foxy" Damon Wingfold then present.

But Earl Wingfold joined in the smile, fully satisfied that all was going aright, for he knew that his father was far too wary to jump at conclusions or to laugh before his game was substantially won.

It was on the same evening that Humpy Dick fell among thieves, and at about the same hour, though the office in which Damon Wingfold and his hopeful son were sitting on opposite sides of a round table, supplied with liquor and cigars, was in an altogether different part of the city.

Damon Wingfold, speculator, lawyer, broker, anything by means of which a fee or a haul might be made—"from lying to highway robbery," as a more blunt than courteous rival once openly declared—was to the full as widely known in Denver, and still less liked or respected, as was his half-brother, Maurice. He was more tricky, more slippery, more cunning and less to be trusted, even when his business honor was involved. At times Maurice acted like a lunatic; at all times you might expect Damon to act like a thorough rascal.

It may be said, in passing, that few in Denver knew that these two men were related, though of the same name. They were known as bitter enemies, neither losing a chance to injure the other, each making no bones about denouncing the other as a graceless scoundrel, only kept out of the hangman's noose by pure cowardice.

Just as Precious Wingfold seemed far too lovely and true and pure to be a child of Maurice, so Earl Wingfold had little in common with his father, so far as outward appearances went.

Now in the very prime of early manhood, he was one to attract admiring glances wherever he went. Tall, athletic, without a suspicion of clumsiness in form or action, he might have stood as a model for Apollo. And his face would

not have disgraced the statue, so far as regularity of features went.

Earl Wingfold was strikingly handsome, and he knew it. His skin was thin and clear, his complexion nearly perfect. His eyes were large and lustrous, bold and seemingly frank, of a deep chestnut hue. Hair of a shade or two lighter, clustered over his high, broad brow in tiny curls, covering his skull in a magnificent crop of which any man might well have been proud. Mustaches of the same hue shaded without concealing his red, full lips, but his jaws and round, dimpled chin were shaven clean.

In his dress the "bad drop" began to show. It was rich, fitting his superb figure to perfection, but it was undeniably "flashy." He wore too many and too large rings on his white, taper fingers. The diamond stud in his glossy front looked vulgar, though it was undeniably genuine. Too much heavy gold chain crossed his vest. Too many bright colors, too large figures marked his clothing for good taste.

It was not the fault of Damon Wingfold that Earl had not turned out more of a gentleman—though the foxy old rascal was perfectly satisfied with the results, and fondly imagined his boy was absolutely perfect, "good enough for a queen, sir!"

He had sent him to the best and most select schools; had kept him at college, providing him with money unstintedly, even though, more than once, he himself was left without a dollar. But the "bad drop" was in his veins, and all this only put a finer polish on a natural-born rascal. And when he joined his father in Denver, Earl Wingfold was a past master in all the low, evil arts of the rowdy, gambler, profligate.

"Nothing 'll break, my boy—don't you think it?" chuckled Damon Wingfold, nodding over his refilled glass. "I've been watching and waiting too long for just such a chance as this—devil make the bed of Maurice in the hottest corner of his bake-oven!"

"And as speedily as may be, after once the divine Precious becomes Mistress Earl Wingfold," amended that rascal, joining in the toast.

A sudden shade came over the wrinkled, vulpine face of the elder man at these words, and with a wry grimace he set down his emptied glass, as though its dregs were bitter as aloes.

"That's the only part I don't like, Earl—your marrying the wench," he muttered, shaking his head slowly.

Earl Wingfold laughed carelessly.

"You're not expected to do the liking part, dad. If I am satisfied, what matters it to you?"

"I don't like the breed! It's bad—"

"A cross with ours, I believe."

The old man puckered his lips tightly, as though choking back a word that might tell too much. Earl watched him closely, but then let the sudden suspicion pass by. These little peculiarities were so common with his father, that really they were not worth sifting down.

"It ain't love, as the looks call it, eh?"

"Call it that, if you like, dad," was the careless reply. "Really, I don't know when I've seen a lady whom I felt a deeper interest in."

"Because she flouted you—because she rolled up her eyes in holy horror whenever she heard your name mentioned—the cat!" Damon Wingfold snapped, viciously, apparently feeling far more insulted than Earl himself.

"Maybe—I wouldn't swear either way. But apart from being as pretty and trim a girl as all Denver can boast, I've got a bet of big money at odds that I can win and wear her."

"You could do that without marrying her!" whispered the old rascal, showing his fang-like teeth. "Curse the cat! I'd rather help you in some such way as that."

Earl Wingfold leaned back in his chair, gazing keenly into the flushed, disagreeable face of his father through the blue smoke curling up from his fragrant cigar. Yet, with all his seeming indolence, there was a light in his own eyes that ere long caused the old man to shift uneasily on his seat and to turn his face away.

"That's all right, gov'nor," slowly uttered Earl, tapping the table with one of his trim boot-heels. "I know you're mighty kind and accommodating, and I'm awful glad to catch you in just such a humor. For I want something of you, this evening."

"Money, of course?"

"If you have any loose change to spare, of course. But that ain't exactly what I meant. Look here, dad," and with a sudden movement Earl Wingfold brought his feet to the floor, his elbow resting on the table, his round chin on his joined palms, his brown eyes fixed on the greenish-gray orbs of his parent. "Why is it you hate Maurice Wingfold so infernally! What has he done to you?"

Foxy, crafty, cunning though he was while dealing with others, very seldom to be penned or caught in a corner out of which he could not slip with the loss of never a hair or rag, Damon Wingfold could not deal thus with his hopeful offspring. He flushed, then turned a sickly yellow, mumbling something about business trickery and past treachery.

Earl Wingfold listened in silence until his voice died away, then he spoke, sharp and to the point:

"I've heard all that before. I want to hear

the truth now. I know that you hate him worse than the foul fiend hates holy water; but *why*? And what sort of hold is it you've got on the varlet? How did you manage to bring him to terms so easily? Mind: it's the truth I'm asking for, and the plain truth I'm going to have, too!"

It was not often that Earl Wingfold used this tone and manner of address, but whenever he did, Damon Wingfold was sure to yield. Hard as granite to all others, in the hands of his son he was pliable as putty.

A poor pretense at a smile contorted his thin lips.

"Of course I meant to tell you everything, in good time, Earl."

"No time like the present. I'm expected to play a part in this little game, and I don't want to go into it with my eyes shut."

Damon Wingfold was lighting a cigar. It took him several minutes to accomplish this to his satisfaction, and even then he spoke slowly, with evident reluctance, shifting uneasily under that steady, penetrating gaze.

"I've hated Maurice ever since his birth, I believe. I hated his mother when father brought her home. There was little love lost between us, and many a sound cuff I got for making up faces at the cat when father was out of sight. And so—well, from that day to this my dislike and hatred has grown and strengthened."

"Not quite so far back, dad, if you please."

"Until this day—and now I've got him where the wool's mighty short! I can pinch him until his very heart bleeds! And I'll never let up while there's a drop in his heart or a groan in his lungs!"

A very demon the grizzled, bony rascal looked, just then. But Earl Wingfold only smiled coldly as he interposed:

"Pinch as much as you like, but don't forget that I'm to have the Precious for a bride. Don't let your hatred put that out of sight."

"Is it likely?" with a harsh, grating laugh.

"When that will cut the rascal deepest and sorest of all? Patience, my boy! Wait a few more days, and the ripe plum shall drop into your mouth—though for the life of me I can't see why you should take a fancy to this little cat? She's not worth a single look from you, my boy!"

"That's for me to judge, remember. But how did you trap him?"

Damon Wingfold laughed silently, leaning across the table and speaking lowly, as though fearing an eavesdropper:

"It was a trap of his own setting, though I touched it off just as he thought everything was safe and sound. He wanted money for one of his trips, and—"

"After the lost cache, of course?"

Damon Wingfold turned fairly green in the face and a vicious curse hissed through his teeth as the great veins swelled on his forehead. If Maurice Wingfold could have seen that face, just then, he would indeed have lost all hope. It contained a hatred, a malevolence far beyond the power of tongue to express.

Only a moment. He caught the deepening interest in the face of his son, and with a desperate effort he regained his self-control, choking back the bitter words that rose in his throat, sinking back in his seat. Earl smiled softly, then said:

"And you're sure there's no loophole through which he can escape? He's a slippery old rascal, remember!"

Damon Wingfold gave a long breath—was it of relief?

"Not the ghost of a chance, Earl; I made sure of that before I let him see a single card. Unless he can raise the money, in good hard cash before the last day of the month, he's a gone 'coon!"

"Just how? It's no hanging matter?"

"Not in the trap the fool sprung, but with that as a handle, I can spring his neck to the rope. Without it, I might not be so readily believed," chuckled the old sinner.

Earl frowned darkly, tapping his knuckles sharply on the table.

"Will you speak out? What has Maurice Wingfold done? What is this hold you have over him? I want the plain truth, without any flourishes. If I can't get it from you, I'll look elsewhere. You understand?"

Apparently he did, for his answer came promptly and to the point.

"He has forged notes for \$30,000!"

The young man's brow cleared instantly.

"Nothing to hang a man in that."

"Enough to bring him into the gutter, and to make any other charge readily believed, though, when backed up by pretty adroit proof!"

"More lies than truth, of course," was the careless retort. "If not—if you could carry it out without sticking your own neck into the noose—you would hardly have waited this long before pouncing on your dearly beloved kinsman."

Damon Wingfold seemed by no means disconcerted by this truly filial speech. He chuckled and nodded in appreciation of the sharp hit.

"I won't say I'll hang him, though I could do it with a mighty good will. But about the forgery: that is a positive fact. No matter how I

got wind of it—and yet, why make a mystery of it with you?"

"Just what I was on the point of asking," laughed Earl.

"You know old Mechsner?"

"The Jew?"

"So people call him, but he's only a Dutchman. Well, I made the discovery through him, and you can bet high I jumped at the chance to invest my money. The old rascal evidently suspected something was out of the way, but he got precious little satisfaction from me. I gave him the regular discount, and locked the papers up safely. I told Maurice I had nothing to do with them; but one lie more or less don't count."

Earl Wingfold was watching his worthy parent closely through all, and now he drew a breath of relief. Until now he had doubted the full extent of the power which Damon held over Maurice, but he doubted no longer. Beyond a doubt the latter had committed a heavy forgery, and the notes were now in the possession of his bitterest enemy.

But he was not yet through with his questions. For months past he had known there was more than one hidden page in the history of his father, and recent events had determined him to get at the bottom facts, if close and persistent questioning could bring that about.

"Now, dad, what about this mysterious lost cache?"

Again the elder man changed color, but a single glance was enough to show him how firmly Earl was resolved to have an ample answer, and he made the best of the matter.

"More lies than truth, but enough truth to break my sleep, many and many a long night," he muttered, huskily, pouring out a glass of brandy and tossing it off at a single gulp.

"I've had a polite sufficiency of the lies; now I want the truth," was the blunt addition. "Both you and Maurice were mixed up in that little affair, I believe?"

"We were partners—yes."

"Go on. I'm waiting, you observe."

"That was many a year ago, when you were a boy and at school. You know I was poor then, and, like many another fool, I set off hot-foot to make my fortune when the Cherry Creek fever broke forth. Maurice Wingfold was another of the pilgrims."

"A queer chance that brought two such lovers into partnership?"

"Any acquaintance is like a dear friend in a strange region," was the quick response. "If we didn't love each other, we were willing to bury our hatred, for the time being. And so—but you don't want the entire history?"

"The main facts will answer for the present. I've heard so much about this wonderful 'lost cache,' this marvelous 'Gold Phantom,' that my bliss will never be perfect until I know all about it; but I can wait for the particulars, if you haven't got all the tangles smoothed out to your liking."

A thinly veiled hint which Damon Wingfold was not slow to perceive, but just then he was glad to catch at even that chance, and lest further speech should prove less agreeable, he hastily added:

"We were part of a band allied in a prospecting expedition, for the Indians were troublesome, and it was rather risky playing a lone hand very far out among the hills. Never mind who the others were, but—"

"One of them was this precious Dark Durg, of course?"

Damon Wingfold turned ashen white, and his eyes roved around with a look of absolute terror in them. He crouched low in his seat, trembling violently, though he strove to hide his powerful emotion under a laugh. It sounded more like a groan!

Earl Wingfold was startled, for he had by no means expected such a display of fright—or was it remorse? However, he quickly recovered himself, and added:

"I believe he said something of the sort, didn't he, when you had that little trouble with him?"

"The devil—the bloodhound!" gasped Damon, hoarsely.

Earl felt a growing interest. This was a discovery he had not at all anticipated. But he was cunning enough to smooth it over for the time being, and after drinking again, Damon Wingfold resumed his story.

He said that good-fortune had at length rewarded their prospecting, and that they gained a modest fortune from the gold tearing gulches in the mountains. But then trouble came upon them when they least expected it. There were dissensions in camp—he hinted that Maurice Wingfold was at the bottom of all this—and then the Indians made a descent upon them.

The first attack was bloodily repulsed, but from the signals which the red-skins sent up, the gold-hunters knew that worse was in store. And so, in the dark, while a tempestuous storm was pelting them, they stole away and wandered all night. Morning found them in a portion of the mountains where none of their number had ever been before, and, worn out by their flight, expecting with each hour to see the enemy come pouring down upon them, they dug a cache and concealed their gold.

As night fell again, the enemy did not come,

and in the desperate fight which ensued, the white men were sadly thinned, the rest breaking away in the darkness and fleeing for life. Of them all, only the two Wingfold brothers ever reached Denver.

Through all this, Earl closely watched his father. He felt, rather than saw, his insincerity. He believed Damon Wingfold was lying, or that he was hiding the most important part of the story. But he let that pass for the time being, contenting himself with saying:

"Of course you looked for the *cache* afterward?"

"But never found it—at least I never did!"

"You think some other found it?"

"Maurice Wingfold—curse him!" the old man grated, with a vicious energy that told he was not lying now, whatever he might have been.

Earl whistled softly, his dark brows arching.

"If he found it, what else could he have been searching for? You know how often he has stolen away. You said that it was to gain money with which to continue his search that he committed that—error."

"I believe he found it and cheated me out of my share—a full half, since all the rest of the party were slain!"

"And this Dark Durg? Where does he come in? Didn't he say something of the same sort, only putting you in the place you stick uncle Maurice?" deliberately demanded the son.

Again that look of terror, that uneasy glancing around, that nervous shrinking from the shadows which filled the corners of the room. But this lasted only for a brief space. Then Damon Wingfold rallied his wits, and faced his son, a little doggedly, but faced him.

"He lied there—he lied clean through! I never knew him. I never laid eyes on him before that day when he tried to murder me! He was mad—a poor devil of a lunatic!"

"So you explained at the time, I believe," was the quiet comment. "Everybody believed you, too. Why shouldn't they? No one knew the rascal, while everybody knew you."

"There was no reason, of course," and the words came with a visible breath of relief.

Earl Wingfold laughed softly, almost contemptuously.

"Even when you bent every energy to down him for keeps! When you spent money like water to set a mob to lynch him! And when he cut his way through—when he broke from the jailers whose pockets held gold still warm from yours—and made his escape, unhurt, though he left dead men and wounded men in plenty behind him—it was as a simple lunatic that you hunted him day in and day out? Too thin, noble dad!"

The foxy eyes tried to meet that steady gaze, but vainly. They sunk again, half-closing as though fearing to reveal too much. And it was almost in a whine that Damon Wingfold uttered:

"You, sonny, turn against me? You suspect me?"

"That won't wash, daddy," was the cool retort. "You and I are both men of the world, and can tell the difference between whisky and water with our eyes shut. I don't want to rub you too hard, but I do want to get at the bottom facts of this little romance. In one word, has this Dark Durg any interest in the lost *cache*?"

"No. He's only a desperate impostor."

"That's hearty. We'll bother ourselves no more with him, then."

"Why are you so curious?" ventured Damon Wingfold.

"Partly to show you that I'm past the age of leading-strings, but mainly because I've taken a sudden but intense interest in this wonderful Phantom of Gold."

"Curse Maurice! he's unearthed it, long ago!" savagely snapped the older villain. "He cheated me out of my share, but I'll even scores with the hoary old villain! I'll hang him—"

"Forgery don't hang, nowadays, and you don't want to forget your own dear thrapple, daddy," laughed Earl, lightly, choosing another cigar and flashing a keen glance across the table as he bit off the tip and struck a match. "I don't believe, Maurice Wingfold has touched that gold since you hid it so cunningly. If he had, he would hardly have stuck to Denver while you were a resident."

"I tried to believe that, but he's a cunning devil—"

"Until you set about trapping him, dad!"

Damon Wingfold laughed, grimly. It was a compliment just to his liking, and his hard face lighted up wonderfully, only to darken again as Earl added:

"Why was I so curious about this Dark Durg? Well, a fancy struck me that he had a claim of some sort on this *cache*, and as I have made up my mind to have that treasure for my own, I wanted to know if it would pay to put him out of the way first."

Damon Wingfold bent over the table, his greenish eyes glowing with a light that seemed to blaze. He hissed savagely:

"Kill him—kill him without mercy if he ever crosses your path, my son! Strike without mercy! Strike—strike sure and swift!"

For a brief space the son calmly returned that

blazing gaze, then he asked, in low steady tones:

"For my sake, or on your account, father?"

Damon Wingfold, even then, visibly hesitated. But only for an instant. He knew that he had betrayed himself by this hot passion. But what matter? He could trust Earl. The lad was a true chip off the old block, only stronger, bolder, steadier-nerved. What better ally could he have? And he was not one to shrink in holy horror from one who had, in the days gone by, committed crimes blacker even than any that had stained his hand. So—

"On my account, if you will have it!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Good enough, as far as it goes," was the calm comment. "You are sure that this Dark Durg—your lunatic—has no possible claim on the lost treasure?"

Damon Wingfold grasped the decanter and with a trembling hand poured out a full glass of brandy. Though ordinarily a temperate man, so far as excessive drinking goes, he swallowed the fiery poison without pausing for breath, without showing the effects in the slightest.

Then, with still another of those curious, suspicious glances about the room, with a slight bending of one hairy ear toward the closed door as though to make sure no enemy was eavesdropping them, he muttered:

"He has a claim, or else he is a ghost raised from the grave!"

"Ghosts are out of date, daddy," coolly retorted the son, "so we'll deal with Dark Durg as a sober reality. What sort of claim has he to the lost *cache*? You swore that only you and uncle Maurice escaped from the Indians that night."

"And so I could have sworn until that black day—until that demon pounced upon me and—ugh!"

One bony hand sought his throat, as though he still felt those deadly fingers gripping it. But a moment later he added:

"I'll make a clean breast of it, Earl. I know you won't judge me too hardly, when you come to realize the—"

A sharp knocking assailed the door, and Earl cried out:

"Who's there? What's wanting? Who are you?"

"Dark Durg?" came the gasping response.

CHAPTER V.

THE CURSE OF GOLD.

FROM the maze of linen and dots and figures on one side of the worn and stained paper to the somewhat peculiar name—or was it the name of a person?—on the other, Precious Wingfold gazed, only to turn again to Rex Stuart with a puzzled air.

"I don't see—what does it mean, Rex?" she asked, returning the scrap of paper, curiosity filling her eyes.

"It means victory for us, defeat for Damon Wingfold and his evil cub. It means the wonderful Gold Phantom, my darling!" cried the lover in tones of joyful triumph, as once more his strong arms wound about her yielding figure and drew her close to his breast.

But, even as he did so, a thrill ran over his frame. He caught—or was it pure fancy?—a glimpse of a human figure moving in the shadows beyond, silent, stealthily, as though striving to get closer without risking discovery. And once more his suspicions fell upon demure little Nettie Malcom.

He stared keenly into the shadows beyond; and though he could hardly have explained just why, he gave a long breath of relief as he saw nothing to confirm his fancy. The hall was occupied only by themselves.

"I'm glad, if you say it is right, Rex," quietly uttered Precious, extricating herself from that ardent embrace with a womanly glance in the direction of the chamber in which poor Humpy Dick was lying, lest Doctor Shipley should hustle out and surprise them. "But still I can hardly understand what you mean. Surely—"

"Surely I have, little lady," laughingly interposed the young man. "Surely I have made a discovery by means of which we can rout the enemy, horse, foot and dragons, so thoroughly that they'll go out their throats with pure rage and mortification. At least, I hope so."

His tones grew graver as he uttered the last sentence, and a little shade came over that fair young face. She had such implicit faith in this man, that his slightest word or look seemed law and Gospel.

"It is not sure, then? There is a doubt, Rex?"

"You shall judge," was his hurried response.

"I found this paper on the person of that little hunchback. It is clearly a map or chart. The fellow is known in town as the Beggar-millionaire, and I've often heard men laughing at his wild claims to possessing untold wealth hidden somewhere. That is why I jump to the conclusion that this is a map telling where a treasure is hidden."

He pointed out the name written on the back of the plan, "Sterling Coin, adding:

"You may not know it, but a man of that

name was once noted in prospecting circles. He led more than one party into the hills where gold was found, and I've even heard his name spoken in connection with your father's. He may have acted as guide when the "Gold Phantom" was lost; I feel positive he was connected with that affair in some shape. If so, why may not this be the right clew to the lost *cache*?"

However weak his reasoning may appear when placed in cold ink, it was plain enough that he had strong faith in its correctness, and a low, tremulous cry escaped the lips of the maiden as she faltered:

"Then—if so—a share belongs by right to poor father!"

"True as holy writ, my lady!" laughed Rex, his eyes aglow.

"And—it may be enough to pay off— Oh, Rex!"

She could not complete the sentence, but with a low, sobbing cry, she sunk into his strong arms, hiding her face on his bosom. The most nimble tongue in all the world could not have more clearly declared how utterly she abhorred the man whom she had partly promised to marry in order to save her father from suicide or disgrace.

The chamber-door opened, and with his usual brisk air Doctor Shipley emerged, only to turn his back and fumble at the knob, burying his round, rosy face in an enormous handkerchief and sending forth a succession of sharp, explosive blasts that not even a pair of lovers could fail to hear and heed.

"Caught cold. Eyes so full I can't see—eh?" with an admirably counterfeited start of surprise as he turned to find the lovers divided by at least two yards. "Looking for you, young man. Little lady, too. Expected to hunt all over the house. Never around—hardly ever. No one to leave with the patient—imp-patient, by—ahem!"

The almost hairless brows frowned ferociously. The red, baby lips puckered up in what was plainly intended for a grimace of disgust. The fat cheeks puffed out until the little red-tipped nose was almost hidden from view. Doctor Shipley was "a holy terror" when once thoroughly aroused—in his own mind!

Rex Stuart was well acquainted with the little surgeon and his peculiarities; indeed, it was through Doctor Shipley that the young prospector gained an introduction to Precious Wingfold, as well as his position in the bank.

"At your service, doctor. What can I do?"

"You could have run away, so I couldn't do what that in— Ahem! Must see you both. Swears he will, if he has to crawl on his hands and knees all over the country! Told him he couldn't. Swore he would. Vowed it would be his death, but that's all the good it done. Will you come? Must I carry you both? Good Moses! what a world!"

If he didn't carry, he pushed them both into the chamber where Humpy Dick, propped up in bed by a pillow at his back, was eagerly waiting their coming. His thin face was pale as that of a corpse, though his dark eyes were glittering vividly, feverishly. His lips parted, and he even made a motion as though to rise in bed, when the little doctor ran forward and checked him, frowning and shaking his head until his gold-bowed glasses flew from their perch and dropped to the floor.

"How dare you, sir? Crazy. Suicide, I tell you! Won't have it, sir! Throw up the case! Shame and a disgrace—good Lord!"

Humpy Dick smiled faintly into the rosy face, slowly saying:

"I must thank them for what they—"

"Thanks—humbug!"

Precious Wingfold glided forward and gently touched the thin hand of the deformed, speaking soothingly:

"The good doctor is right, sir, though his manner may appear rude and abrupt to a stranger at first—"

"Well! Now! What next? Ugh! Pretty pass things are coming to! Me rough—rude—bear with a sore head, next! Ugh! Poof!" and in utter disgust Doctor Shipley caught up his glasses, put them on bottom side up, and started for the door in high dudgeon, rubbing his chubby hands together as though washing them of the affair altogether.

Rex Stuart intercepted him, however, and a whispered word recalled the testy physician to his senses. None the less readily, perhaps, that his keen ear caught the words:

"He is very kind. I thank him for his skill, though it is spent in vain. All I ask now is strength sufficient to prove my gratitude—"

"By blowing out your own spark—just what you're doing, sir!" cried the doctor, with restored authority. "I won't have it, sir! You're my patient. Placed under my care. My honor is at stake. Save you in spite of yourself. Got to! Keep still, if I have to gag you, sir! Or chloroform. Ether. Pillow—and sit on top of it my own self, sir! So there!"

Still smiling Humpy Dick waited until the little doctor shot out his last explosive, then spoke, faintly as to tones, but resolute and unshaken as to purpose.

"Doctor, as man to man, forgetting physician

and patient, tell me if you really believe you can save my life?"

Doctor Shipley parted his lips only to close them again as one long finger lifted warningly. He tried to meet those bright orbs, but his own drooped and shifted.

"There's no certainty. Nothing is certain in this world. But you have a chance—a good fighting chance—if you'll only listen to reason and keep your mouth shut."

Humpy Dick smiled still, but there was something in it that sent a chill through the veins of the maiden.

"That comes from your lips, not your brain, doctor. You know, as I know, that my race is run."

"If you will persist—good Lord! who'd be a doctor? Only an infer—ahem! Fool! I will say it. And now I feel better. Much!"

Rex Stuart stepped forward.

"Disputing can do no good. You, my friend, are too weak to talk much, just now. Take the doctor's advice and rest as best you can. When you are stronger, we will listen to whatever you wish to say. It is for your own good that I give this advice."

"I'll never be stronger. I know that I have got my last sickness. My brain is clear and I must speak. I have been mad—I know it now! That madness may return at any moment. I may—"

His very eagerness choked him, and flinging out one hand he looked imploringly at Doctor Shipley.

Professional instinct overpowered disgust, and the doctor hustled to the bedside, plying all his arts, with ultimate success. The faintness passed off, and once more Humpy Dick spoke:

"I must tell my story. You must give me strength, doctor. I ask it in the name of justice. If I die with my story untold—I will not! I must tell it before that frightful numbness once more seizes my poor brain! Give me brandy—anything, just so I may tell all!"

"Got to! Suicide if I don't. Die if I do. Good Lord! Tear up my sheepskin to-morrow. Will. If it kills me!"

Thoroughly disgusted, the little doctor mixed up a draught and thrust it into Stuart's hand.

"Give it to him. I won't. Murder. No less!"

"On my own head be it," smiled Humpy Dick, reaching out his hand as the young man hesitated. "Quick! My time is short. I must speak!"

Almost involuntarily Rex Stuart held the glass to the deformed man's lips. Tremblingly, eagerly, Humpy Dick swallowed the contents, then sunk back on his pillow with closed eyes.

Stuart glanced quickly toward the doctor, but a shake of the head banished his new-born suspicion.

"Straight. Wake up in a minute. Strong as a horse for an hour. Go out like a candle. Ugh! Take down my shingle first thing in the morning. Won't stand it! Can't stand it! That's flat!"

His prediction proved correct, for in a brief space Humpy Dick opened his eyes, a faint color coming into his thin face. The doctor gave him one keen glance, then turned his face to the opposite wall, hands folded behind his back, his nose high in the air. He would not countenance this frightful violation of medical laws by looking on.

The deformed seemed about to speak, when a rap at the door checked him. Rex opened it, and revealed Nettie Malcom, who courtesied prettily as she uttered:

"Please, Miss Precious, your father has waked up and wishes to see you. Nurse sent me with the message, please."

Precious left the room, Rex softly breathing a word or two in her ear as she passed by him. She nodded slightly, he closed the door and turned again to the bed on which lay the wounded man.

"It is as well, perhaps," slowly uttered Humpy Dick. "Such a tale is hardly fit for young and innocent ears. You can tell her what is necessary afterward."

"I will, unless you will listen to reason and postpone—"

"It is now or never with me," a little sharply interposed the hunchback. "I know my hours are numbered. I know I have been unsettled in my poor brain, and that may come back again. No! if you are an honest man, you will listen to what I have to say, and now!"

"Kill him, sure! I don't care! Give up the case. Won't touch it. Sorry I ever saw him. Ugh!"

"Yes; I have been what men call crazy, but it was not precisely that. My brain was clouded, but still I never wholly lost my reason. I can see things dimly, as through a smoked glass, that happened when my brain was at its worst, and I couldn't do that if I had been all mad!"

"Years ago—how plain it is to me now! I was strong and active and straight, not the miserable, deformed wretch you see now! It was then men called me by my right name—Sterling Coin."

"Eh?" ejaculated the doctor, whirling about with his face all aglow with interest and wonder. "Sterling—I won't!" and he doggedly faced the

wall again. "Won't listen. Stop my ears. Murder. Accessory before the fact. Sterling—git out!" and he clapped both hands to his ears, shaking his white fringed head vigorously.

"I had a college education," added the deformed, paying no attention to the antics of the eccentric doctor. "I made a close study of geology, and when the gold-fever broke out, I started for the mines to win a fortune. I was poor, and though I met with some success, I was unlucky in money matters. And so, lacking the gold to properly develop and work my discoveries, I looked about for help."

"I found it in a man named Milo Garth. I told him of what I had discovered during my last trip in the mountains, and soon gained his confidence. He had money in plenty, but that was not enough. The Indians were threatening trouble. They had killed my mate on my last trip, and I only escaped by a miracle. It would be worse than folly to penetrate so far into the hills without a stronger force."

"It was not difficult to gather men sufficient for our purpose. Though gold was plenty for the lucky ones, there were double the number who were on the point of starvation. Milo Garth selected the men, six in number, besides ourselves."

"It was easy to come to an arrangement with them, satisfactory to all. They had neither money nor outfits. Milo Garth was to fit them out with tools, animals and provisions. I was to guide them to the gold I had discovered, in a new and thus far unworked field, deep among the mountains. For my part, I was to receive one-fourth of all the dust the party brought back. Milo Garth was to have an equal share with me for his outlay. The rest were to divide one-half evenly among them."

"We made all our arrangements with great secrecy. Where so many desperate wretches were fairly starving, though able and willing to work, an outfit like ours would prove a terrible temptation. And there were many others who would try to dog us to our new field, if they were to even suspect our purpose. But never mind that. It is enough that we succeeded in stealing away from Cherry Creek without being followed."

"I led the party direct to my discovery, and it proved even richer than I had painted it. There was gold in abundance, and we made big wages every day. But the more gold we gained the less satisfied grew some of our party. Though it was the same as a gift to them—for as yet we had seen nothing of the red-skins, and it was only to stand them off that we took the six men along—they grumbled at and envied us for our larger shares."

"To eke out our provisions, we did some hunting, taking care to go far away from our golden valley before firing a shot, and after game was secured, hiding the back trail as thoroughly as possible, lest some prowling savage or wandering prospector chance across it and follow it to our diggings. In this duty we took turns, hunting in couples, the better to bring back such heavy game as might be killed."

"One evening late, the man who went out that morning with Milo Garth for fresh meat, came staggering into camp with a terrible tale. Our chief was dead!"

"It was hours before he could tell his story, so exhausted was he with fright and fatigue combined. It was simple and straightforward enough, when he did tell it, and not one who listened doubted his perfect truth at that time."

"The two men had poor luck in finding game, and wandered many miles from camp before getting a shot. Then Milo Garth wounded an elk, and as it showed plenty of blood signs along the trail it made as it dashed up the hill, the hunters resolved to separate, each taking one side, and thus try to cut the elk off as it attempted to cross over."

"This man—I'll tell you his name after a bit—said he performed his part of the agreement, but could discover no signs of either Garth or the game. He kept on around the hill, beginning to think that in his hurry Garth had fallen and crippled himself, while the elk was dead or hiding among the brush on top of the hill. And then—he made a frightful discovery!"

"He saw the dead body of Milo Garth, and a tall Indian bending over it, knife in hand! He lifted his rifle to shoot the savage, but before he could secure a certain aim, he heard other voices, and saw more savages running toward the spot."

"He admitted that he did not stop to count them, though he declared he recognized at least one woman among the number as he turned to save his life by flight. He swore he believed the running savages had discovered him, but a few minutes convinced him of his mistake. And he had hardly made this discovery, when he tripped and fell into a deep hole, where he must have lain insensible for hours."

"When he recovered his senses and crept out of the hollow, he could hear nothing of the Indians. He stole back to where he first saw them, but they had gone. He found the gashed, scalpless and frightfully mutilated body of Milo Garth lying upon a fire of logs, almost burnt to a crisp!

"It was an awful task, but he dragged the remains away from the fire and covered them over with stones, to keep off the wolves, then he made the best of his way to camp, to tell his story."

"Weak and worn though he was, he led the way to the spot the next day, and we found that the wolves had scattered the stones and almost destroyed the remains, only a few dismembered bones remaining. The horrible sight sickened me, and my powers gave way. I could not aid in giving those remains burial, and I had to be helped back to camp. It was but the beginning of a spell of illness that—would it had—almost sent me after my poor friend!"

Humpy Dick covered his eyes with his thin hands, his voice growing low and husky. Doctor Shipley, forgetting his repeated vows, hurriedly mixed another draught and held it to his lips. The wounded man eagerly drained the glass, then cleared his voice and resumed his story:

"And yet, as I afterward had reason to believe, it was the means of saving my life, that fit of madness which fever brought upon me. As I learned afterward, I broke away from camp and fled like a deer, yelling and calling on Milo Garth to wait for me—that I would not desert him! And how I passed the next two weeks, God only knows! It is a perfect blank to me."

"I can dimly remember crawling into camp on my hands and knees early one morning, to be scowled at and cursed savagely. I believe my life was even threatened by the very man who brought us the news of my poor friend's death! I can remember his pointing a rifle at me, and of another's wresting the weapon from him. Then all is a blank again."

"I was not to die so easily. The curse of gold was not so merciful to me as that! Slowly I recovered, and then I learned that only the day before my return, the murder of Milo Garth had been fearfully avenged!"

"The hunters discovered a camp of Indians, they told me, and one of the savages was pointed out as the same one who had murdered Garth."

"It was a family of Indians, they told me; two grown men, three women, and several children. The man who witnessed the murder swore that they were the guilty ones, and in revenge that family was slain without mercy, even to the youngest child!"

"I shivered as I listened, for something told me that no good could come of such a barbarous deed. It was right enough to kill the murderer, but the little children—that sickened me!"

"Still, I dared not say much. I received little kindness or care at the hands of those whom I had led to a fortune. I caught many a black and hateful glance, and overheard more than one muttered curse and wish that I had never come back to rob them of their hard earnings."

"Think what I suffered during those days! Alone with six reckless and hardened ruffians, any one of whom could have crushed my poor life out with a single hand, I was so weak and helpless? To lie there and see their ugly scowls, to hear their curses and hopes that I might soon clear myself out of their way! I could not sleep, lest they murder me while unconscious. I dared not eat, for fear they had put poison in the scraps they flung me."

"And so, one night while all were asleep, I silently crawled away, thinking that it would be better to die in peace and quietness. I did not think I could live. Indeed, I doubt if I much desired to exist longer, after those wretched days and miserable nights."

"But my time had not come yet. Strange as it may appear, I gained strength and vigor from that very hour, though I had little save roots and berries to eat at first. And during my aimless wanderings—urged on by that horrible dread of being tracked up and butchered—I unexpectedly came upon the scene of the Indian massacre."

"At first I was startled and puzzled, but then it all came back to me like a dream. I recalled the story my comrades had told me of their descent upon the camp, and the butchery which followed. But there was one fact which I could not make clear. They had said nothing of burning their victims, or if they had, it had escaped me in my horror."

"Yet I saw that a huge pile of wood had been dragged to the spot and set on fire. I could see a few small bones or bits of bones gleaming whitely amidst the ashes. And near one end of the pile, I saw a portion of a human skull, so small that it must have once formed part of a child, almost baby."

"I cannot explain just what urged me on, but I know that I carefully examined the spot. I know that I felt a vague wonder as I discovered that the ashes were still warm! The burning could hardly have been longer ago than the day before I came on the spot!"

"From that instant my brain began to grow clearer and my powers of reasoning to return. I knew that my mates could not have kindled the fire without leaving traces near by, and I set out to look for any such. I found signs, but it needed no more than a single glance to convince me that they were made by none of our party, for they were of a moccasined foot."

"I hurried away to the nearest cover, fearing a shot from ambush; but none came. I was afraid to stir from my hiding-place while the

light of day lasted, for something told me that an avenger had risen up for that butchered family of savages, and I half-expected to be the first victim.

"While I lay there, I reasoned the matter out. Some one of the Indian party must have been absent when the remainder was butchered. He—for the track was large and deeply impressed—had returned, and gathering what the wolves left of his kindred, burned them. I felt that he would hardly miss finding some evidence to prove the murder. The bullets might tell him much. Reason would do the rest. And would he not seek a deep and bitter vengeance? Even then he might be prowling about our camp—even then his rifle or his hatchet might be paying off the bloody score!

"It seems strange to me now, recalling all I suffered at the hands of my wretched comrades, how I could feel so anxious on their account, why I was so eager to warn them of their unsuspected peril. But so it was, and with the first shades of night I was on my way back to camp.

"I must have been guided by instinct, for surely I had taken no note of my aimless wanderings while my poor brain was so upset. But let that be as it may, I lost little time in making my way back to camp.

"I can see now how unwelcome was my appearance, as I came upon them, just as they were eating breakfast the next morning. I can recall what black and even murderous scowls greeted me, but then I noticed them not. Weak and worn, I had thought only for their safety, and pantingly I made known my discovery.

"It shocked and terrified them at first. I could see that from the nervous manner in which they glanced about them, from their hurried inspection of their weapons. But it soon wore off as the hours passed and they failed to detect any signs of an enemy having been prowling about while they slept. And then—Look!" he suddenly gasped, opening his eyes which had drooped during the last few minutes, pointing toward the door, where stood a tall, dark figure with folded arms. "My God! it is the demon! the Indian avenger!"

Rex Stuart gave a sharp exclamation as he recognized the strange man who had proclaimed himself Dark Durg, the Ishmaelite!

CHAPTER VI.

LOP-EARED MOSE SEEKS A MARKET.

BOTH Damon Wingfold and his son sprung to their feet at the sound of that voice beyond the closed door, but only in this respect were their actions similar. The elder man, with chattering teeth and a wild, hunted look in his greenish-gray eyes, shrunk back toward the furthest corner of the room, the very picture of superstitious fear.

Earl Wingfold, on the other hand, drew a revolver from beneath his coat, thumb on hammer as he reached back and caught his father by the arm, checking him and hastily muttering:

"Open the door! I'll blow him through the moment—"

All this in a single breath, and before the choking, gasping voice could add aught to the name of Dark Durg. Then, plainer, clearer, cutting short the fierce muttering of the younger man, came the words:

"Lively, old fel! Lose fun—gay old row—Dark Durg in town! I'm off for a hoss, and if you—"

The excited voice died away as its owner hurried on with partly restored breath, but he had said enough to give father and son an inkling of the error into which they had fallen.

Earl broke into a laugh. Damon snarled out a curse as his trembling hands grasped the brandy decanter, his teeth still chattering, his yulpine countenance blanched as white as its natural texture would allow.

"I'm thinking you kept back a good bit of the truth, daddy, when you spoke of this wonderful Dark Durg," said Earl, showing his white teeth in a malicious smile as he replaced his weapon and picked up his hat. "I'm burning up to hear the whole story, but it'll have to keep for a little, I reckon."

"Where are you going, Earl?" muttered Damon as the other turned to the door. "I don't want—to stay alone—ugh!"

"You heard what he said? Dark Durg in town, kicking up a row! I've got a score to settle with the rascal, and I'll take horse with Jim Piner as the shortest way to get at the facts."

"Kill him, sonny! Don't let him talk! Kill him right off—but take care of yourself!" hurriedly muttered the old man, as Earl turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

"I'll do my level best, bot your life, gov'nor," with a laughing yet grim nod. "One comfort; I can't well make a bigger botch of it than I begin to see you must have, once on a time! So-long, dad!"

As the tall figure darted away up the street and vanished amid the shadows, Damon Wingfold closed the door and turned the key in the lock. He stood with ear bent for a few minutes, but if there was any unusual disturbance in town, it must have been at a distance too great for the sounds to reach his position.

He stood thus until he caught the rapid clat-

ter of iron-shod hoofs, and drew a long breath as he felt assured that Earl, in company with his bosom friend and comrade in extravagance, Jim Piner, whose sharp summons and panting ejaculation had so curiously misled them both, was already on the track of his deadly enemy.

"If he can only meet and kill the demon!" hissed the old man, now more like his ordinary self as he shuffled back to the table and mechanically refilled his glass with the amber liquid. "If I knew that this night would see the last of—"

The sound of his own voice seemed to startle him, for closing his jaws with a click, he glared around the dingy room as though looking for the speaker. Only for a moment. The knowledge that Earl and others were on the track of Dark Durg seemed to revive his natural courage. And Damon Wingfold was not a craven so far as physical qualities go, despite the abject terror he had displayed while fancying Dark Durg was battering at the door in order to grapple with him in vengeance for the black, treacherous past.

Scores of times in the days gone by he had ventured his life when the odds seemed all against him, with a light laugh and a sneer on his thin lips. More than once he had gazed into the weapon of an adversary on the mis-called "field of honor," his nerves steady and true. And even now, in comparative old age, it was very seldom that he thought twice of the result or paused to count the odds when aught was to be gained by either hard knocks or bold bluffing.

Only on this one point was he at all superstitious or fearful. It was only the thoughts of Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills, that could unnerve him now.

Dark and frowning were his wrinkled brows as he sat staring at the untasted liquor in his glass. And then his thin lips parted to emit short, broken sentences which gradually grew more connected and intelligible.

"If I only knew for sure! If I could be positive—bah!" and he clicked his yellow, wolfish teeth together as he tossed the long, thin grizzled hair back from his temples with a gesture of self-disgust. "I am growing childish and losing my nerve. That devil is dead and rotten years ago! Didn't I see him—"

His voice died away, but there was an evil light in his cold eyes that told how much comfort the chain of thought gave him. And gradually the color came back to his face. He no longer started and shivered as a sound came to his ears from the night.

He left the brandy untasted, but lit a fresh cigar and leaned back in his chair, his greenish eyes half-closed, the mask wholly dropped from his face. He was not badly pleased with what had happened that night, now that he could calmly review it all.

What if Earl had treated him shamefully? He was glad to see the fine young fellow waking up to business. He would make a noble ally.

"That infernal likeness won't unnerve his arm when he meets Dark Durg!" the old rascal muttered, with a show of his fangs. "He'll think only of the lost cache, and strike swift and sure to remove one claimant from the path."

Once more his narrow brows contracted and a puzzled look came into his eyes.

"It was bad enough when he comes only as the avenger of those infernal red-skins, but to lay claim to being Milo Garth! Dead and rotten, ages ago! I can take oath to that! And yet—how comes he with that same look in his eyes? It sent a chill of horror and superstitious fear straight to my heart! For an instant I really believed a ghost from the past had risen to haunt me for—"

There was a peculiar choking in his throat, and his husky speech died away in inarticulate murmurs. A sip of brandy appeared to relieve this, as well as to brace him up again, for a low, chuckling laugh came gurgling up in his throat as he leaned back and gazed with half-shut eyes through the curling smoke wreaths.

For full an hour he sat thus, thinking, plotting, clearing away the tangles that rose in the evil path he was tracing out step by step. Now going back to the past of long ago, then returning to the present, showing his wolfish teeth as he gloated over the vain struggles of the man whom he had hated and loathed ever since their boyhood.

Then, a sharp rap at the office door brought his feet to the floor and his hand to a pistol butt. Breathlessly he listened, a grayish shade settling over his wrinkled face, that old fear returning again.

"I say, boss, ef you're to home, say so!" came a hoarse, impatient voice without, and followed by another rapping on the panels.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" responded Wingfold, a breath of relief breaking from his lungs.

As yet he had not recognized the voice, but he was certain it did not belong to the enemy of whom he first thought at hearing the rap.

"Heap good fri'nd, an' you'd orter be the fu'st one to know that, boss! Think o' that night when Darby croaked!"

With a quick stride Damon Wingfold reached

the door, turning the key in the lock and opening the door, through which a tall, heavy figure slipped the moment the aperture was wide enough, as quickly shutting the barrier behind him.

"You here, Mose Sawyer!" ejaculated Wingfold, surprise written on every line of his face. "I thought you were safe in California!"

Lop-eared Mose grinned after a sickly fashion as he strode to the table and without waiting to change from decanter to glass, drank long and eagerly of the strong waters.

His flashy attire had suffered severely that evening. Torn and soiled with both dirt and—it was blood! And there were blood lines along the side of his face, not yet dried enough to peel off.

All this Damon Wingfold took in at a glance, and his brows wrinkled even more than natural as he silently turned the key in the lock.

Watchful as a wild animal, Lop-eared Mose noted this action, and he grinned sulkily.

"That's all right enough, boss, but it ain't jest as you think. The perlice ain't on my track fer anything I've did to-night. Ef I've bin in a row—an' I ain't denyin' of it—I fit on the right side, fer once. Anyway, I kin fetch three good men to sw'ar to that effec'!"

Wingfold started, his eyes beginning to glisten.

"Not with Dark Durg?"

"Dark Durg or Dark Devil, one or t'other, sure!" and the burly rough dropped into a chair drawing a long breath of relief.

"You killed him? Say you left him dead!" hoarsely muttered Damon, leaning forward, the picture of intense anxiety and longing.

Only to sink into a chair with a smothered oath as the Droop-eared Daisy slowly shook his head in denial.

"Ef I did, I ain't knowin' to the fact, boss! But ef you hold a interest thar, don't throw it up yit. Heap lot o' critters tuck his trail, an' ef they don't fetch him to Limerick, 'tain't beca'se they don't mean clean business from the word jump!"

"He's a devil! He'll escape them again, just as he has a score of times before this! Nothing can kill him, nothing will choke him off but a taste of—"

Lop-eared Mose made a slight rustle as he leaned forward to catch a plainer view of the muttering man's face, and this sound recalled Damon Wingfold to his old prudence and cunning. He brushed a trembling hand across his face and when it fell, he seemed calm and composed again.

"A friend of my son's passed by here not long ago, saying something about a row in which this fellow, Dark Durg as he calls himself, was concerned. They set out to join in the pursuit, or something of the sort—I really didn't pay much attention. When you spoke of a row, and fighting on the side of justice, I thought perhaps you might have been with them."

Glibly enough his tongue rattled on, but Lop-eared Mose was too keen a judge of human nature to be deceived so easily. He knew that for some reason Damon Wingfold took an intense interest in this Dark Durg. But, after all, that did not concern him, though it might be as well to bear the fact in mind. Knowledge was better than power, sometimes, since it could be readily turned into gold.

"I didn't see much o' the p'izen critter, that's a fact, boss. Jest when he come out the heaviest I wasn't in the best o' trim fer takin' a fly at sech a mighty tough cock as folks say he is," and Lop-eared Mose gingerly touched the tip of his forefinger to the furrow through his scalp which had been cut by the bullet discharged by Humpy Dick as he lay helpless on the ground when Rex Stuart scattered his enemies.

"Of course you know that there is a big price set on his head, dead or alive?" slowly asked Damon Wingfold.

Lop-eared Mose grinned slightly, shaking his head.

"Never even hearn tell o' him by name afore the p'izen critter belched it out over the other side o' town this night. Mebbe you don't know it, but I've bin livin' a sorter quiet an' 'tired life o' late."

"I heard you were stopping at San Quentin," laughed Wingfold, taking up a cigar and lighting it. "How did you get cut?"

"Jest left. They was too durn pertick'lar. Kept a gent workin' all day, an' made him go to bunk with the chickens. No fun, no lush, no nothin' but kicks an' cusses an' sech onmannerly doin's. I didn't like it, an' so hunted another boardin' place."

Clumsy enough, but Damon Wingfold understood his meaning: he had broken prison by some means, and, eluding pursuit, had made his way to Denver. Not without doing some professional work in the interval, judging by his dress and flashy jewelry.

In truth, Damon Wingfold was not particularly pleased at seeing the Droop-eared Daisy, though in times gone by he had made some use of him as a ready, unscrupulous tool. Just at present, however, he would prefer being alone with his thoughts while awaiting the return of his hopeful offspring with news of Dark Durg.

"Glad to see you your own man again, old fellow; but, if it's all the same to you, I'm awful busy just now, and—"

"I'm quiet as a kitten, boss, an' you'll never know I'm in the room ef you don't want," grinned Moses placidly, but with a reddish gleam in his bruised eyes. "Go on with your work. I've got a bit o' figgerin' to do, too. Want to make out jest how much it's wu'th, what work I've done this evenin'?"

"There are other places in plenty, and I'd rather be alone," was the sharp retort. "If you want a small stake, I don't mind giving it to you, for past services, but—"

"Kick me out, boss," drawled the Droop-eared Daisy, leaning back in his chair, hands thrust in his arm-holes, an ugly leer in his blood-shot eyes. "I'm here, an' I feel like I'd tuck root to stay, too!"

Damon Wingfold did not look much like a craven just then. Though the rough was big enough to take him across his knee and break him in two, to use the vernacular, he bent forward, shaking his long, bony forefinger in the blood-marked face, snapping:

"If I say go, roots won't hold you long, my fine fellow! Don't presume too much on your past services. I paid you your price, and far more than you earned. I repeat: I am busy. I prefer your room to your company. Will you leave peaceably, or—"

He filled the hiatus far more significantly than words could have done. A loaded revolver slipped into his hand, and the muzzle stared Lop-eared Mose full in the face.

But the big ruffian stirred not, save to utter, sharply:

"It's business, not durn foolishin', that brung me here, boss. Putt up your dropper afore you hurt somebody—an' that'll hit you wuss then it will me, or you kin take my hat!"

Damon Wingfold hesitated. Lop-eared Mose added quickly:

"You hain't diskivered that lost *cache*, hev ye, boss?"

The weapon dropped, and with a lightning movement Mose caught it and wrenched it from the old man's hand, laughing softly:

"You're too nervous to han'le sech tools, old feller, an' fer fear what I've got to say mought jar the hammer off, I'll take keer o' this little playthin', ef you don't mind."

Damon Wingfold shrunk back, showing his teeth like a cornered wolf. But Lop-eared Mose made no move to follow up his triumph, though he drew his burly figure more erect, his tones changing abruptly:

"I run onto an old pard o' mine this evenin', boss. Mebbe you've hearn tell o' him; a mighty crooked little critter, Humpy Dick."

"What is he to me?" snapped the old fox, sourly.

"That's what I'm axin'," was the placid retort. "Didn't know but what he was a old fri'nd to you, as well. Folks say he's wu'th a power o' money, an' them's the sort you used to like the best."

"A lunatic—fit only for an asylum!"

Lop-eared Mose laughed shortly, disagreeably.

"Jest what I thought my own seif when I fu'st see'd him this evenin'. A crazy hunch-up'er, I said. Durned shame fer his kin-folk to let him out loose without a keeper to skeer off the dogs! But that was afore I made him out as a old mate—I say, boss!"

"And I say that I have no interest whatever in this crazy cripple!" snapped Wingfold, angrily. "If you haven't anything of more importance to talk about, and refuse to leave my rooms when I ask you, I'll leave them to you for the time."

He rose to his feet as though about to put his threat into execution, but Lop-eared Mose grasped him by the arm, saying:

"Don't fly off the han'le, boss, jest beca'se I pay you back in your own change. Set down, or you'll only be sorry once—an' that sorry'll last you to your grave! I mean business, now!"

Damon Wingfold resumed his seat, more because he knew that he was physically unfit for a struggle with this rough of mighty muscle than from a belief that he would hear anything worth the time.

"That's hearty, an' everything'll go on smooth as grease, boss!" nodded the Droop-eared Daisy, with a cheerful grin. "You offered me a big price one time ef I could find that lost *cache* fer you?"

A vivid light leaped into those little eyes and Damon Wingfold leaned forward, all eagerness, as he ejaculated:

"I'll double, trouble the amount now, Mose!"

"It's a whack—shake!" and the rough grasped the bony hand.

"You have found—"

"Humpy Dick—no less, boss! You don't like the color?" with a short laugh, as the eager light turned to one of disgust.

"He is a lunatic. I've heard of his silly ravings on that point, but I gave them not a second thought. If you place any dependence in what he may have told you, Mose, you're a bigger ass than I ever thought you!"

"I found Humpy Dick, boss," placidly repeated the desperado. "An' when I found him I found what was left of as fine an' straight an'

smart a man as you ever run acrost in the hull course o' your life!"

Damon Wingfold stared at the speaker, something like a sneer curling his thin lips.

"You don't swallow that, boss, but all the same, it's the gospel truth. An' I tell you that them as takes Humpy fer a sardine, never yit see'd a whale to recognize it—no they didn't! He's clean color, an' don't need no washin' n'r quicksilver. But let him drap fer a bit."

"You want to find the *cache* you lost long time ago. I tried my level best to ketch onto it fer you, but slipped up on it, *bad*. I reckon I kin call the turn on it now, though!"

"Do it—show me the lost *cache*, and I'll pay your own price!"

"Money down, or when we corral the dust, boss?"

Lop-eared Mose seemed to find particular pleasure in first raising the hopes of the old man only to cast them down the next moment.

Damon Wingfold scowled as he sunk back into his seat.

"Not a red unless you succeed! I won't be bled any more!"

"Nur I ain't in that line, nuther, boss," laughed Sawyer. To show how dead sure I be that I'm on the right track, I won't ax a dollar unless I show you the lost *cache*. Ef I do show it, you're to pay me over jest three times what you promised me the fu'st time. Is it a whack?"

"I will give it to you in writing, if you prefer."

"No need. You won't go back onto a old pard—one that knows so many o' the ins an' outs o' your past, boss," laughed the rough, with a significant leer. "Your word is good. An' now fer why I lugged this crooked critter, Humpy Dick into the confab: he holds the secret o' the lost *cache*!"

"Impossible!"

"But dead sure, true enough, boss!" was the positive retort. "It was to git hold of this secret—he kerries a paper tellin' all how to git at the dust, in his breast. Leastways," slowly, frowning, "he *did* tote it thar not more'n two hours ago!"

"How did you make the discovery? Why are you so positive?"

"Fu'st, I tuck the critter to be looney, as you said. He was fightin' off the jim-jams, an' couldn't git a drink to satisfy 'em. I tuck him up an' watered the critter, fer I'd bin thar my own self, an' knowed how to feel fer him thar."

"He went on in the durnest rigermarole o' crazy stuff you ever hearn tell of. I was watchin' of him, sorter keerless like, when I tuck a notion I'd see'd the imp afore. Not crooked up like that, but tall an' straight an' trim-built a piece as you could find in seventeen States!"

"All imagination. If your hopes are founded no better—" and Damon Wingfold shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"I'll be heap satisfied ef they be," quickly interposed Sawyer. I tell you, boss, I turned cold all over when I placed the critter—an' I *did* place him, you bet! I was jest stirred up enough to spit out the name he went by in them old days, an' you'd orter see how he wilted when they hit him right whar he lived! Looked like a rattlesnake hed jumped onto his face without givin' warnin' n'r nothin'!"

"What name was it you called him by?" and from the quickness with which he spoke, it was plain enough Damon Wingfold was beginning to grow interested in the matter far more than he cared to show.

"Wait a bit, boss. I didn't want to make a show thar whar so many hungry critters was watchin' fer p'int, so I maniged to git Humpy out-doors, an' then I made sure he was the man I once knowed when he wasn't crazy, n'r ragged n'r crooked all up in a heap! An' ef I ain't a born liar, you knowed the man, too! Knowed him mighty well, boss!"

"What do you mean? What was his name?" demanded Wingfold, hoarsely.

"Sterling Coin, true as I'm a livin' sinner, boss!"

A wild, gasping cry escaped the lips of Wingfold, and something close akin to abject terror filled his thin face.

CHAPTER VII.

HUMPY DICK SELECTS HIS HEIRS.

AND Dark Durg it was, beyond a doubt!

Rex Stuart could see this as he stared at the tall, dark figure standing just within the chamber, gazing steadily at the pale face of the deformed as he told the black and bitter story of the past. Even as he caught himself wondering how the strange being had succeeded in entering the room without attracting his or the doctor's attention, Rex Stuart was comparing this man with what he could recall of the daring rider who had so suddenly changed the odds in that street row.

A little over six feet in his moccasins, erect, perfectly proportioned, a model for one who wished to draw the likeness of a physically perfect man. His muscular development and graceful lines were well displayed by the snug-fitting dress of buckskin, soft and pliable, giving with each motion of his arm or body.

His face and hands were dark as bronze, either by nature or from the effects of constant expo-

sure to the sun and tanning winds. The jetty blackness and straightness of his hair, however, lent strong coloring to the report that if not all red-skin, Dark Durg carried a good deal of Indian blood in his veins.

His face was beardless, long and narrow, with high cheekbones and prominent chin. His eyes were black and lustrous, now glowing from beneath the shadow of his slouched hat as though the sockets were filled with molten metal.

A broad belt encircled his waist, supporting knife, hatchet and a brace of heavy revolvers.

As Humpy Dick shrunk back, his eyes wildly distended, one thin hand pointed quiveringly toward this strange being, Dark Durg suddenly threw back the drooping brim of his felt hat, stepping forward with a low, peculiar ejaculation. It did not seem to be a word or words of any language, but its effect was marvelous.

That look of wild terror vanished from the face of the deformed. His head turned squarely toward the strange being who was slowly moving toward the bedside, and then a glad, almost sobbing cry escaped his pale lips, just as Rex Stuart stopped before Dark Durg, threateningly.

"Stand back—keep your distance, or—"

Dark Durg smiled slightly as he paused, saying:

"I am his friend. Judge for yourself."

Even as he uttered these words in a deep, mellow tone, Rex Stuart involuntarily turned his head at the cry that came from the lips of the wounded man.

"My father! I am glad—so glad! I have prayed for your coming, but I feared I would never again gaze upon your dear face! See! the morning has dawned, as you predicted—for I am a man again! My poor brain has burst its shackles, and—doctor—"

Blood rose in his throat and choked his excited, exultant utterance, and as his head fell back on the pillow, Humpy Dick cast an appealing, imploring glance toward Doctor Shipley, who at once hastened to his side, spluttering, exploding, indignant and prophetic all in a breath.

"Knew it! Said so! Suicide! Hung, next thing, for aiding and abetting! Serve ne mighty right. Yes! The devil—hundred devils—all the devils in history, sacred and profane! Good Lord!"

With a single sweep of his right arm, Dark Durg put Rex Stuart aside, and standing near the bedside, keenly watched the movements of the fussy but really skillful doctor. His interest seemed deep, but in his glowing eyes alone was it written. Hard, cold, immobile remained his deeply bronzed face.

Hard and stoical it remained even when Doctor Shipley, having done all he could for the deformed, giving him another of the strengthening draughts and propping him in an easier position, turned upon him much as a mother hen might fly out at a grave mastiff, spluttering:

"Infernal scoundrel, sir! Want a licking—kicking, too! Get out! No right here. My patient. My room. My Lord!"

Poor doctor! He was being terribly tried that night, and it is little short of a miracle that his growing indignation did not actually burst him—or at least split his clothes up the back!

Dark Durg without a word or even a bow by way of apology, took him by the arms and coolly set him aside, stepping close to the bed and bending over Humpy Dick, whose thin right hand went up until it lovingly touched that dark bronzed cheek, much as a tired, ailing infant might caress a patient, loving mother.

"I knew you were looking for me, dear friend, but I began to fear you would come too late to see— Ha!" and he cast a wild, startled glance around the room. "They're yelling and howling—don't you hear them?"

"You are safe, good lad," softly muttered Dark Durg, grasping the quivering hand and pressing it reassuringly. "No one can harm you while I am to the fore."

"Not me—you?" panted the deformed. "They howl for your life! I can hear them! Go! ride away on good old Midnight, and you can laugh the fleetest of them all to scorn."

"In good time, Dick. When you are able to go home with me."

A faint smile flitted across the face of the cripple.

"I am going home, but not with you, father."

"It isn't so bad as that, Dick. You are going to get well and be as strong and hearty as ever in a few days. Don't be downcast—"

Humpy Dick laughed softly, painfully, his dark eyes drooping as though to take a survey of his frightfully crippled frame.

"It is so much to lose, isn't it? This lovely form! This— Hark!" and his glowing eyes turned toward the door as though he again caught the sound of the bloodhounds.

"All is quiet, Dick, and there is no pressing danger," calmly uttered Dark Durg. "I took care to throw the hounds off the track before I doubled on them to come and visit you. I hoped to take you back home with me, but—"

"Can't! Sha'n't! Impossible, sir!" exploded Doctor Shipley. "He's under my care, sir, and I'll fight for his rights, sir! But may the devil eat me without salt if I don't wish I'd never seen him or any of your relations up to the ten thousandth degree—so there!"

Dark Durg turned sharply upon the spluttering physician, but the thin hand of Humpy Dick arrested him, the deformed hurriedly saying:

"He has done much for me, father, and I am grateful. He wishes to give me every chance, but I feel that he is mistaken."

"Never make a mistake. Right—you wrong, I tell you, sir!"

"I've got it hard, and I'm not sorry. Only for leaving you, father," and the dark eyes grew soft and loving as Humpy Dick pressed that sinewy hand of bronze. "But that will be a blessing for you. I was so much trouble! I gave you such anxiety when the roving devil crept into my brain and drove me off to town, tempting me to swill the bitter, bad poison that—Let it pass, then, daddy," he smiled, as Dark Durg bent over and gently touched his thin lips with a finger-tip.

"You have been all that kept me from going mad, Dick," muttered the outlaw, his deep voice filled with a peculiar quaver. "You bid me go home, but without you there to make it home, I have none!"

"Always kind, ever loving and gentle to me, daddy!" muttered Humpy Dick, pressing his lips to the hard hand. "Always fearful of hurting my feelings—but let that wait. I want to say something—I must finish what I was saying when I first caught sight of you, daddy! And it frightened me—think of that!" and he laughed faintly, his dark eyes fixed on the bronzed face bending over him. "Afraid of you! But I was growing so weak and nervous. I took you for that terrible avenger—for the Indian—who—"

His voice choked and faltered, while a wild light leaped into his eyes. A muttering sound in his working throat. Dark Durg bent his ear close to the blood-tinged lips, then suddenly lifted the wounded man's head, holding a flask of liquor to his mouth.

Humpy Dick choked at first, but then seemed to swallow freely, even greedily; though Doctor Shipley uttered a cry of indignation as he moved forward and caught at the bottle, only to reel and fall almost prostrate as Dark Durg tripped him with one long leg.

"It's rank assassination! I won't have anything more to do with such an outrageous—I wash my hands of the whole affair, sir!" the enraged doctor spluttered, turning and rushing to the door.

Rex Stuart caught his arm and tried to reason with him, but in vain. This last outrage was the final feather, and Doctor Shipley would not listen.

"Giving him brandy—I smell it, sir! Brandy to a dying man! My patient, too! And without leave or—the devil and all his imps. I won't stay to witness such idiotic malpractice, sir! I'll expose the whole affair in—no, I won't! For then I'd show my infernal, asinine stupidity in ever taking hold of—My Lord!"

He broke loose and flung the door open wide, Rex Stuart still keeping him company through the hall, only leaving him when the irate physician agreed to remain in the house within call, should any sudden emergency demand his services. And obtaining another pledge, not to alarm Precious or her father by any outburst, Rex Stuart returned to the chamber where he found Humpy Dick propped up in bed, looking almost as well as ever under the heroic treatment of Dark Durg.

The latter turned toward him as he entered, speaking rapidly:

"We were just wishing for your return, sir. My poor friend wishes to speak with you. You can see how weak and feeble he is growing. As an honest man, grant his wishes, if you possibly can."

"Anything I can do, I will cheerfully," quickly responded Stuart, nearing the bedside.

Humpy Dick smiled faintly, but his voice was quite strong as he spoke:

"Not for long—I believe the end is drawing very near, though it is easier for me to talk than it was a while since. I would like to tell you all my sad, black story, but—"

"If it must be told, Dick, can you not trust me?" gravely interposed Dark Durg, his finger on the pulse of the deformed, an anxious light in his jetty orbs.

The cripple raised the hand to his lips, laughing softly as their eyes met. No need for words. That look told more than a volume could detail, of love and trust and perfect faith.

"Is it wise for you to speak at all?" asked Stuart, gravely.

Though he had slight experience in such matters, he fancied he could detect a change in the appearance of the deformed for the worse. The thin face seemed thinner; there was a peculiar grayish shade on the features, and a pinched look about the nostrils. He feared that the end was indeed near at hand—nearer even than Humpy Dick thought.

The paper in his bosom seemed to burn his skin, even through his shirt, and one hand involuntarily stole toward it. Only to pause as he reflected how much that might mean—how all-important that might be for both himself and his true love!

"I must—I will speak!" sharply replied Humpy Dick, before Dark Durg could answer.

"I've told you part—I wish I could tell you all, but my friend will do that, should my powers fail before—"

They seemed failing even then, for his voice choked again and he cast an imploring glance from the flask of liquor to the face of the Ishmaelite. A brief hesitation, cut short by the imploring light in those dark eyes, and the flask touched his lips.

The deformed lay back on the supporting pillows, his eyes closed, his thin nostrils quivering, his breath coming short and fast. But then the spasm passed off, and once more he smiled faintly into those pale, anxious faces. And his voice, though low, was steady and clear:

"I told you of the gold we won, and I'd like to tell you how it was lost—how the curse fell on those evil wretches for their sins; but I dare not attempt it now. Some time, perhaps—if not, then my good friend will try to make it all clear to you," with a nod toward Dark Durg.

"I have been laughed at and ridiculed; have been called a madman for saying that I was rich—worth a great fortune," he resumed, a faint smile curling his thin lips. "Mad I may have been—I know I have been out of my mind at times—but never mad on that score. I am rich, if you call gold riches. I have a secret here, in my bosom, that has cost—Ha!" he gasped, tearing open his clothes as he vainly sought for the paper. "I have lost it! Those devils robbed me!"

"Not of this paper," hurriedly uttered Rex, holding out the chart which he took from his breast. "I found this on your person as the doctor was looking to your injuries, and he suggested that I take care of it for you. I trust it is what you want?"

Humpy Dick grasped the paper, but was looking so fixedly into his eyes that Rex Stuart began to doubt. Could it be that those rascals had succeeded in obtaining what they were after?

He paled a little at the thought, for he had almost unconsciously placed all his hopes of winning Precious, of defeating her bitter enemies, on that worn bit of paper.

Humpy Dick laughed softly as he lowered his gaze and glanced hurriedly over the chart. He pressed it close to his bosom while adding:

"It is the right one, my friend. You held the key to a fortune—yet you give it back to its rightful owner, like a man and a gentleman!"

"It was yours. What else could I do?" mechanically uttered Rex, though a flush crept into his face.

"Nothing else, as such. But I've met so few honest men. Stand out where I can see your face more plainly—so!" as the young man instinctively obeyed. "A good face—I like it! And the lady—well you can give her my thanks. They will come with a better grace from your lips. She would be thinking only of my hideous—bah!"

A harsh laugh cut short his speech. Dark Durg bent over him, but Humpy Dick shook his head, the old fond light coming back to his eyes.

"It is so, daddy. Only you know me as I used to be. But let it go. I am wasting time and time is growing very short with me. Yes—I know what I am saying. And I'm not sorry—only for leaving you."

He beckoned Rex to draw nearer, and placed the precious chart in his trembling fingers, saying:

"I give you this, and trust the gold it will lead you to, may benefit you and yours a thousand-fold more than it has any of those who took part in gathering the store together. I take you for an honest man, and so trust you. One half is to be yours. The other—for the young lady who stood out so stoutly for a poor, helpless cripple, even against one who—"

"I was bound to think first of her, both as a woman and as my promised wife," hastily muttered Stuart, his face flushing hotly before the half-laughing light in those dark eyes. "But I swear to you that I meant to do all a man could for you, when once I had seen her home."

"I know—I heard—though you thought me dead or dying. I show that I believe—by trust I place—daddy!"

The Ishmael of the Hills thrust Rex Stuart aside as he sprung forward and caught the sinking head of the deformed. A tinge of bloody froth lined the thin lips of the wounded man, and a gray shade had settled over his thin, worn face. He seemed in the last stages, if death had not actually overtaken him.

Stuart watched him for a moment, while Dark Durg was wiping his lips and moistening them with brandy, then turned and silently left the room in quest of Doctor Shipley, though he felt that medical skill could avail naught in such a crisis.

The ears of true love are very keen, and Precious Wingfold opened the door of the chamber occupied by her father, just as Rex was about to touch the knob. The smile faded from her face as she noticed his evident agitation, and she faltered:

"What is it, Rex? What has happened?"

"The poor fellow is worse—I want the doctor."

Even as he spoke, Doctor Shipley came tip-toeing to the door, and catching that look up on his face, buried his own in the big handkerchief to smother the explosive words that leaped to his lips.

"Wait until I come again, Precious," hurriedly whispered Stuart, as he drew the door shut and hastened after the physician, who was half-way to the other chamber.

"Needn't tell me. Know it all. Butchered. Just that!" grunted that worthy, as he scowled upon the young man, then turned the knob and entered the chamber.

Humpy Dick was lying back on the pillows, his eyes closed, but his chest rising and falling regularly. The doctor stared with tightly pursed-up lips for a moment, then turned upon Rex, whose amazement was even greater than that of the worthy physician, snapping:

"Joking, eh? Make a fool of your father! What?"

He whirled swiftly as a voice came to his ears. Humpy Dick had opened his eyes and looking at Stuart, said faintly:

"Remember—you two—divide. He tell you how—"

Dark Durg gently touched the lips of the deformed, saying:

"You must say no more. I understand your wishes, and will see that they are carried out. If I am wrong, press my hand; don't try to talk."

Humpy Dick smiled faintly, then closed his eyes, his thin fingers shutting on the sinewy hand of the Ishmaelite.

"Young man, you can accept that treasure without a scruple. By all the laws of God and man, my poor friend here owned it to the last grain of dust! He has no living kindred. I am his sole remaining friend, and I have no use for gold."

"I knew—else you—"

Again that hand rested lightly on the thin lips, and Humpy Dick said no more. One loving, grateful glance, then his eyes closed again.

Dark Durg turned once more toward Rex Stuart, who was eagerly waiting for the end of this strange scene, but before he could speak, there came a loud, peremptory rapping at the front door. All in the room gave a start, save Humpy Dick. He lay smiling, breathing slowly, steadily, like a child in sleep.

Dark Durg gently withdrew his hand from the relaxed grasp, watching to see if the motion disturbed the wounded cripple, but as it did not, he bent his lips close to the ear of Stuart, saying:

"Is there no way to obtain a sight of those at the door without their knowing it? Can you hold them out for a few moments?"

"Devil of a row! Sick house! Kill them—serve right, too!"

"Look out for that cat of a maid, doctor!" hastily cried Stuart, as the choleric physician rolled out of the room. "Don't let anybody open the door to them, just yet!"

"Like to see 'em! Pough!" grunted the doctor, shaking his fat fist at Nettie Malcom, who was just emerging from her chamber. "Go to bed, you vixen! Get out—get in, I mean! Now! How you like it?" he snorted as he grasped the knob and leaned back with his weight the moment Nettie vanished inside. "Hold the fort. Me. You bet!"

Rex Stuart knew that there was no other to open the door, unless Precious should make the venture, and feeling sure she would trust all that to Nettie, until the clamor annoyed or surprised her, he led Dark Durg across the hall and into another chamber, whose windows looked out over the street.

There was no light in the room, and the windows were already partly raised, the evening being warm for the climate of Denver. The blinds were canted sufficiently to afford a fair view of the steps leading up to the front door, and through these Dark Durg gazed intently for a few moments.

He saw four men standing on the steps, and the light of the moon was sufficient to reveal the uniform of policemen on three of the men. The fourth wore ordinary dress, but a savage curse came grating through the tight-clinched teeth of the Ishmaelite as he caught a glimpse of the man's face.

Drawing back, touching Rex Stuart on the arm, just as the knocking at the door was renewed, louder, more peremptorily than at first, he led the way back into the hall or passage. And as the light of the hanging lamp fell upon his face, Rex Stuart uttered a low ejaculation of wonder.

Dark Durg was frowning, his eyes glittering savagely, and there was something in his face that involuntarily suggested the idea of a wild beast driven to bay by its relentless enemies.

"Can you keep those devils at bay for five minutes?" asked Dark Durg, hurriedly, grasping the young man's arm with a force that made him wince, despite his natural grit. "It's that devil—but I'll foil him yet! I'll cheat him if you can give me that long a grace!"

"They were policemen—after you?"

"Answer them and gain time, if you hope to ever profit by that gold-chart! They are after him, not me! After that very secret, or I'm widely out in my guess!"

"You think—"

"I know!" grated Dark Durg, as the pounding on the front door was renewed. "It's a devil's scheme to win that secret—else Damon Wingfold wouldn't be coming here so close on our heels with police to back him up! He has murdered for that gold—he will take it from you if you give him even the ghost of a chance!"

"Let him try it on!" sternly muttered Rex Stuart, as he turned toward the stairs, while Dark Durg entered the chamber. "But let him make his will first?" he added grimly, clinching his strong teeth. "The gold is mine and hers! I'll fight for it to the bitter end against all odds!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FOX AND THE GRIZZLY STRIKE PAWS.

"STERLING COIN! He's dead—I saw him—that red-skin devil killed him, after—"

Damon gasped out these broken sentences, choking himself off as though, even in his sudden terror, he noticed the grim smile that played about the bull-dog mouth of the Droop-eared Daisy. He even tried to laugh, but that was a ghastly failure, and betrayed the full extent of his agitation, even more than his chattering tongue.

Lop-eared Mose echoed the laugh, but his was easy and confident, with an under-current of significant meaning that caused Damon Wingfold to hide his tell-tale face by bending over in a fit of coughing as though the smoke from his cigar had strangled him for the moment.

"A monstrous poor job o' killin', I tell ye, boss! Ef anybody paid Mister Injun fer the butcherin', he got sold out too cheap!"

Damon Wingfold was using his handkerchief vigorously as he lifted his head, his greenish eyes darting a swift glance into the bruised and blood-marked face of the desperado. All seemed open and above-board there, and he felt that matters might have turned out worse.

"You must be mistaken, Mose. I am positive that poor fellow never lived to get clear of the hills."

"Clinch it right thar, boss," a little sharply interposed Sawyer, bending forward and squaring his massive jaws. "I knowed Sterling Coin long afore you 'nd me come together. We was pards 'way back in the '50's. We tromped over the biggest part o' 'Forny together afore we split—never mind jest how nur what fer. That was the fu'st an' only time I knowed old Clean Dirt to show a want o' sand; an' it didn't come o' bein' afear'd o' hard knocks then, nuther. But never mind that, I say."

"The idee is this: I ain't one who can fergit too easy. I make a pard once, an' I don't rub his face out o' mind the minnit he takes a different trail from the one I like best. Ef a hundred year was to pass by afore we come together ag'in, I'd know that face. An' so I'm readin' it off to you like a gospel sharp slingin' a holy text at ye, that Sterling Coin wasn't killed by nobody. That he's livin' an' in Denver this very minnit. That *Je* is Humpy Dick an' Humpy Dick is *him*. An' that he kerries with him the secret to that same *cache* o' dust you was so red-hot to diskiver. An' now you've got it, boss!"

Deliberately, without the slightest show of excitement Lop-eared Mose spoke, striking right forefinger into left palm at the end of each and every sentence as though clinching it. But all the time his eyes were fixed on the face of Damon Wingfold as though unwilling to lose even the slightest change of expression. He knew from past experience how tricky and uncertain this old fox was, if he could gain anything thereby.

There was much to be seen, too, for rarely had Damon Wingfold so lost all control of his facial muscles. And this was all the more evident from his efforts to hide the emotions that were running riot in his half-stupefied brain.

"I can't believe it!" he muttered, as Lop-eared Mose came to a pause in his dogmatic statement.

"He is dead—I saw him—"

"Did you plant him deep enough to stay putt, boss?"

With a visible shiver, Damon Wingfold shook his head.

"That's whar you got left, then," with a grin. "It's a good rule to foller; I never fergit it. Plant deep, an' stomp the kiver down hard. They ain't no raisin' up after that—not any!"

"There wasn't time. The red devil killed him."

Lop-eared Mose nodded gravely, but with a laughing devil in his bloodshot eyes.

"That's all right. I ain't blamin' you, but all the same, Humpy Dick is what's left o' my old pard, Sterling Coin. I see'd him this night. I see'd him feelin' in his breast when he croaked about his treasure. I knowed then what it meant, even ef I hedn't ketched the rattle o' paper under his grip. I knowed he was tellin' the truth when he swore he hed dust to throw to the dogs!"

"Why did you let him slip through your fingers? Why didn't you secure that paper, even though you had to slit his infernal throat?"

Hot and savage hissed the words through those wolfish teeth, and as he bent nearer to the Droop-eared Daisy, Damon Wingfold was once

more all alive, apparently convinced that there was a foundation of truth beneath this strange assertion.

"I done the best I knowed," and the red light deepened in the eyes of the desperado. "You ain't the man to rip an' snort an' cuss in my face, ef you be boss! I held my grip while three good an' stout boys went down fer good an' all! I ketched a knife-pint fu'st twice over. I blunted a bullet all out o' shape with my cabezal! Let him slip? The devil hisself would 'a' hed to let go while he spit on his fingers!"

Damon Wingfold was rapidly regaining his usual acuteness, now that he began to realize what a serious obstacle had so unexpectedly risen up in the path he had marked out so carefully. He saw that he would require every aid and all the knowledge possible were he to win his long-cherished game.

"I beg your pardon, Mose, for my hasty speech," he said, his voice low and even humble. "Your news was so unexpected—I can hardly bring myself to believe it, even yet. Alive—Sterling Coin?"

"Now Humpy Dick, the durndest chunk o' crippledness I ever see!"

"I have thought of him as dead for years! I could have taken my solemn oath that I saw him a corpse! And now—"

"He's a mighty healthy corpus—or was, when I fu'st run onto him this very night that is!" laughed the Droop-eared Daisy, with a peculiar emphasis on the emendation that did not escape his companion.

"And you are quite positive you made no mistake?"

"At fu'st I couldn't hardly b'lieve it, no more then you kin now, boss, but when I slung that name out at him, an' he showed up so mighty plain, then I was pritty sure I wasn't fooled. But still I wanted to be sure. Somehow it hit me hard that you'd give a few ducats to know who the critter really was. Then I come to think mebbe the durn critter wasn't all wind when he run on 'bout his golden secret. An' so, to hev a quiet game 'thout too many eyes watchin' or too many fingers stickin' in the mush, I run him out o' Dan Nipperley's an' into a shebang whar I knowed I could count on findin' some o' the boys ef I should want a lift in any way."

"Ye see, boss, it hain't bin many months sence I got out o' quod. I ain't overly anxious to try it on ag'in, without they's a good stake to be won by runnin' the resk. An' so I wanted to make all sure afore I went in deeper."

"Not that I counted on its bein' much of a job. Humpy Dick was runnin' neck-an'-tie with the jim-jams, an' I reckoned with a pint o' whiskey I could lead him up to the rack an' go through him at my ease."

"I tuck him to the old crib—you know, boss, an' settin' him down over a glass of heavy wet, I tuck his photograph. An' then I was dead sure I hedn't made no mistake. It was Sterling Coin, sure as I'm the Droop-eared Daisy!"

Damon Wingfold sat bowed over with elbows on his knees, gnawing viciously at his thumb nail. His little eyes glowed and sparkled. His thin nostrils dilated and contracted as his breath came short and hot.

He could see that Mose Sawyer was speaking the truth, yet even now he could not fully believe what he heard. If so—could the dead return to life? First, Dark Durg—Milo Garth, as he firmly believed—and now Sterling Coin!

Time and again he had encountered Humpy Dick while on the streets of Denver, and he remembered looking at the horribly deformed fellow with a vague sensation of pity; a sentiment that troubled him but little. Yet, if this could have been the man that guided that ill-starred party into the mountains beyond Cherry Creek, surely he would have felt some premonition of danger? Surely he could not have looked upon that face and forgotten when he last saw it, lying—

A shiver crept over him, and he caught at the nearly empty decanter of brandy. Lop-eared Mose pushed the other glass toward him, and when both were filled, the burly desperado resumed his narrative:

"I hed a room in a handy part o' town, whar neighbors ain't apt to stick thar smellers whar they ain't fu'st 'vited, an' I counted on gittin' Humpy over thar. I got him outside the do', an' tipped the wink to three o' the boys. Not that I thought I'd need them, much, unless it mought be fer crowdin' off any ducks as might know Humpy an' go fer some fun with the critter."

"This was the way I spelled it out, boss. I knowed it was my old pard, sure enough. I knowed that he was the man who played guide to you critters on that trip. But I wasn't dead sure he hed the papers to show the way to the lost *cache*. It would be easy to s'arch him an' find out, but ef he didn't have no sech, why skeer him off? Mebbe it mought be he could tell somethin' to set a feller on the right track, even ef he was looney. Or mebbe show the way—who knows?"

Lop-eared Mose paused to finish his glass, and Damon Wingfold nodded approval. His little eyes were gleaming with growing hope. Surely the fellow would not draw out his account so

long, only to bring up at shameful defeat in the end?

"But Humpy wouldn't hev it that way," with a snort of disgust. "He swore he must be goin' home, or somebody—I couldn't make out who that somebody was, jest then—would be comin' fer him, hot-foot! An' so, keepin' all the chainties in view, I tried coaxin' the best I knowed how, until I see it wouldn't work. Then I pertended a centipede was crawlin' in his shirt, an' tore it open to snatch the paper—"

"You got it, then?"

"Durned ef I didn't—right in the riks!" grinned the Droop-eared Daisy with a wry grimace as his hand went down to a blood-spot on his right side. "The critter smoked what I was up to right off, an' run out his stinger at me, *bad!* Fu'st off I thought I'd got it right whar I lived, an' I actilly turned sick to the in'ards at fu'st. I yelped fer the boys to wade in, an' so they did, the best they knowed."

"Four stout men against a cripple! And yet he got the best of you all!" suddenly exploded Damon Wingfold, losing the control of himself for which he had striven so desperately a little before.

Lop-eared Mose showed his teeth a little, but did not resent the taunt as savagely as he probably would had he not felt master of the game, even yet.

"Don't you try to rub it in, boss! An' I'm sayin' that fer your own good, too!"

"But you did lose him, didn't you? Isn't that what you're driving at with your long-winded chatter? You haven't the paper?"

"Mebbe I hev an' mebbe I hev'n't. Mebbe I'm thinkin' too hard fer to speak right up to the top-notch. Mebbe I'm tryin' to make out ef it wouldn't pay me bigger to drap you right whar you be, an' go it on my own hook. Mebbe—"

Damon Wingfold leaned forward and grasped the huge hand of the burly shoulder-bitter, a fawning smile taking the place of the sneer which had rendered his foxy face anything but pleasant to look upon.

"I didn't mean it, old fellow, and I hope you'll forget and forgive. I feel sure you acted all for the best, but some of your mates must have blundered terribly, or one man, and he a drunken cripple, couldn't have got away from them all! Just think!"

"I be thinkin'—that you're the durndest critter fer hoppin' the track, skeered at a shadow, I ever see!"

"But you haven't got the paper?"

"Would 'a' hed it sure enough, but jest as the Loys was puttin' out his chunk, up come a couple o' critters an' crowded in like they was jest sp'ilin' fer a free fight. An' ef one wasn't a gal-woman, I'm a bob-tailed hornet in a blizzard!"

Surprises were numerous for Damon Wingfold that evening, and this one came near "knocking him out of time." He stared at the Droop-eared Daisy with mouth and eyes wide open, scarcely able to believe his ears.

"It's straight as a string, boss," grinned Sawyer, half-sheepishly. "One was a gal, but the other—he was a thumper from Hammettown! He hit out right an' left, turnin' Red an' Chris. end over end as ef he'd stuck an ex through thar middles an' wanted to see how they'd do fer lead wheels in a bearst! Durned ef it wasn't so pritty done that I come mighty nigh cheerin' him over ag'in afore I thought which side my ducats was placed onto!"

"Who was he? And the weman?" ejaculated Wingfold, too impatient to get at the bottom facts to appreciate the shoulder-bitter's enthusiasm in this particular respect. "You knew them?"

"Not right then," grinned Sawyer. "I hed too much to look after, though I did see so much o' the fun. I 'lowed the three lads could take keer o' the stranger, es he didn't flash no tools, an' I put fer Humpy to git his papers afore the row spread any funder. He lay like he was laid out fer the cooler, but durned ef he didn't pull a pop afore I could git my hooks onto him, an' over I keeled, too quick! 'Feared like the bull side o' my head was gone fer keeps! An' a mighty close call he made, as ye kin see, boss!" parting the hair and showing the bloody track of the bullet.

"And so he escaped you all!"

"Ef we'd bin a round dozen, boss, I'm open to bet the game would 'a' went jest the same way," coolly nodded Mose, taking particular delight, as it seemed, in keeping the speculator on the "ragged edge."

No need to follow him word for word, however. Enough that, though he lay apparently out of the fray for good, he saw all or nearly all that followed, up to the hasty retreat of Dark Durg with Humpy Dick in his arms from before the growing crowd:

"I done a heap o' thinkin' durin' them few minnits, boss," he added, settling down to business again. "I see that Humpy was bad hurt, ef he wasn't laid out cold, but I knowed that his secret was still on him an' I wouldn't give that up so easy. So I rolled over into the shade an' when the big critter run off, I follered to the corner. I see him chuck Humpy in a buggy, an' could hear him tellin' the gal to take keer o' him like she mought a sick baby. An'

when he lepped on his hoss to bluff the crowd, I tuck after the buggy, though I wasn't in the best fix fer a footrace with a good hoss."

"You dogged them home?" eagerly asked Wingfold.

"I jest *did*, boss, but it wouldn't 'a' bin so easy, ef the feller hedn't slowed up jest as he did. My head was a big hornets' nest, an'—"

"You can find the house again? You know who lives there?"

"A feller called Maurice Wingfold," laughed the Daisy.

A savage oath grated through those yellow teeth. The thin face became frightfully contorted. The bony fingers shut and opened, to close again as though they were encircling the throat of the man whose name the burly ruffian had just pronounced.

"Don't talk—let me think!" he panted, suddenly catching his breath, resting his elbows on the table, supporting his chin with his joined palms as he stared at vacancy with his greenish eyes.

Lop-eared Mose seemed quite content, drawing the decanter toward him and draining it into his glass. But careless as he seemed, his keen eyes were not idle. He covertly watched the rapid changes which passed over the face of his employer, evidently trying to read their meaning.

Enough food for thought had Damon Wingfold, surely!

Dark Durg—Milo Garth! Humpy Dick—Sterling Coin! The chief and the guide of that luckless expedition—both alive, though he could have taken oath to their death! And Milo Garth intrusted Sterling Coin to the care of Maurice Wingfold! Could it be that they were all leagued together against him? How else could the events of that evening be explained?

Something like a groan parted his lips as his face slid down and buried itself in his palms. The ground seemed opening beneath his feet and threatening to swallow him up.

"Ef Denver was what she used to be, boss, it wouldn't be hard to sweep the board, even yit!" muttered Lop-eared Mose, growing impatient with silence, now that he could no longer continue his curious study of that changing countenance.

Damon Wingfold started, staring a moment into the blood-marked face, then smoothing his own by a powerful effort.

"What do you mean, Mose?"

"That one o' the boys ain't so dead but what, ef it *had* to be, I'd take oath I see Humpy Dick stick him from ahind. 'Mebbe we could git up a gang to yank him out o' thar, even yit, though Denver ain't what she was in them good old days, or—"

Damon Wingfold checked him with a swift wave of the hand.

"Wait—let me think it over for a bit. I think—Ha!" and he sprang to his feet with a smothered cry of vicious exultation, his face flushed, his eyes all aglow. "I've got it!"

"Pinch it tight, boss! Don't let it git away!" grinned Mose.

Damon Wingfold resumed his seat, wiping all traces of excitement from his face with a single sweep of his hand. And leaning across the table, his eyes fixed on Lop-eared Mose, he spoke rapidly:

"I begin to believe that you were right from the first, Mose. I could not bring myself to believe it then, but I do now. Humpy Dick is Sterling Coin. He knows where that lost gold has gone to. I believe he has hidden it to draw from whenever he runs short. If not, how has he lived so long in Denver without work? Where has his gold come from? From that very lost *cache*!"

"Straight as I could cipher it out my own self, boss!" and Sawyer nodded approvingly.

"If so, he has forfeited all claims on it, by his trickery, even if he hasn't already spent his full share. I and and Maurice Wingfold are the only surviving claimants, and he has cheated me out of more than his share would amount to. That leaves me alone as the rightful owner."

Again Moses coincided with his employer.

"You say that some of your friends were hurt in the row?"

"Red Hooper, Chris. Frenger an' Fred Miller—all throwed too cold to skin. Dark Durg done the job for 'em."

"You mistake. Humpy Dick killed at least one of the trio."

"Durned ef he *didn't*, now!" grinned Lop-eared Mose, beginning to see the drift of these sharp questions. "Stuck him from behind, an' never axed what it was done fer, the p'izen critter!"

"You stand ready to take oath to that effect?"

Lop-eared Mose gave a wry grimace. He was little troubled with conscientious scruples, but after his recent experience in a California prison, to which retreat he still owed some years' service, he was not eager to mix himself up in any law business. True, he was in little danger of recapture while in Denver, for certain reasons, but his chance might be destroyed were he to figure too prominently before the public in a trial for murder.

Damon Wingfold apparently read his hesitation aright, for he said:

"I'll see that you come to no harm, Mose. I'm not going to publish my little game in all the newspapers, be sure of that!"

"Waal, ef I could see a little bigger hole at the fur end, boss, I don't know but what I *mought* remember jest how Red went under."

"You hang back to make terms, then?" half-sneered Wingfold.

"It's what pays fer grub an' drink, boss," grinned Moses.

"It is not my greatest incentive, though!" and the yellow teeth came together with an ugly emphasis. "I care more for revenge than I do for gold. And if you will be guided by me in this—if you will act just as I advise, bearing in mind that I will not bring you into dangerous contact with the law—I swear to divide that lost treasure equally with you, just as soon as we discover it."

A little anxiously, dubiously, Damon Wingfold made this offer, at the same time keenly watching the rascal sitting opposite. On his answer depended his faith in the marvelous tale he had listened to. Unless Lop-eared Mose had implicit faith in the clew to the lost *cache* being in Humpy Dick's possession, he would demand payment from a more ready fund.

Mose Sawyer did not hesitate a moment, but reached out his huge paw and grasped the bony hand that was extended toward him, crying:

"It's a whack, boss! Even Stephen, an' I'm your huckleberry fer to b'ile, stew, bake or eat raw on the bushes! Half an' half goes!"

Damon Wingfold never gave hand heartier or more earnest clasp than he did just now. Already he felt that his long game was nearing an end, with the best trumps in his possession.

"I'll keep faith with you, Mose, and thank you into the bargain!" he ejaculated, fairly laughing as he contracted his bony fingers, their eyes meeting. "It's not the gold I care so much for, though that is well worth fighting hard for. But I want to even scores with that infernal hypocrite, and leave him just a little in my debt!"

"He ain't my 'lation, so chug him all you git a chance, boss," grinned the burly yet lesser rascal.

"Be sure I'll show him little mercy," nodded the other, then, adding in a more business-like tone: "You will go with me to swear out a warrant against Humpy Dick, for murder!"

"Ef you say so, boss," muttered Lop-eared Mose, his face lengthening wonderfully. "Ef it can't be did noother way, reckon I'll *hev* to."

"Bah! man, can't you see what I'm driving at even yet?" laughed Wingfold, with a trace of contempt in his voice and face.

"Ef they's a joke in it, durned ef I kin pick it out!" growled Mose.

CHAPTER IX.

JUSTICE AS A STALKING HORSE.

DAMON WINGFOLD laughed inwardly as he gazed into the dogged, half-angry face of the Droop-eared Daisy. It was a drop of consolation for what he himself had experienced but a few minutes before. And, after all, he cared more about the readiness of the hands he employed than their quickness of wit.

"If it's a joke, Mose, be sure we'll have all the laughing to do," he uttered, hastening to mollify the scowling shoulder-bitter. "I don't see how we can make a failure of it, without the worst of management."

"Nuther do I!" grunted Lop-eared Mose, with assumed indifference.

"Patience, my good fellow," nodded Damon Wingfold as he hitched his chair a little closer to the one occupied by the convict, leaning forward and marking off the points with bony fingers as he stated them in rotation. "I'm going to let you in on the ground floor, and if you can pick a single flaw in my scheme, don't hesitate to point out the weak spots. It's got to be a clean sweep of the board this time, or our cake's all dough."

"I'm going to arrest Humpy Dick for murder. You are going with me to swear out the warrant, which will never see the light of day, you muddy-witted rascal!" he chuckled, as Lop-eared Mose shifted a little uneasily on his seat.

"Gum-game clean through, from start to finish, eh?" ejaculated the burly ruffian, his face broadening, his bloodshot eyes losing their dubious look as he began to see the drift of the dastardly scheme.

"With just enough of truth and reality in it to butter the pill and make everything work smooth, Mose," laughed Damon Wingfold, rubbing his bony hands together as though in mute applause for his devilish cunning. "The warrant will be regular enough, and I'll have it put in the hands of the proper men to serve it, too!"

"Not the perlice, boss?" ejaculated Mose Sawyer, his chin drooping.

Damon Wingfold made an impatient gesture. "I know what I'm playing, my good fellow, and as I stand to lose the heaviest stake, you can leave it all to me. Unless I saw my way perfectly clear, be sure I wouldn't take the first step."

The Droop-eared Daisy was silenced, if not convinced. He had entered for the campaign, and could not back out now, though the cold chills began to run races with each other up and

down his backbone as ugly visions of San Quentin came flitting before his mind's eye.

Like all of his class, he had a natural antipathy for aught that wore the blue and locust of law and order's privates, and this was by no means lessened now that he moved under a cloud.

Damon Wingfold was silent for a brief space, his brows wrinkled, his wits busy at work. Then he spoke again, watching Lop-eared Mose closely, as though he expected to learn more from his face than tongue.

"Can you pick up a few solid boys at short notice, Mose? I mean of the sort you can rely on through thick and thin, who know how to follow orders without stopping to ask questions?"

"Good pay, good workers, plenty, boss," was the prompt reply.

"They can name their own figures, and I'll supply you with funds sufficient to satisfy them, never fear. But there must be no mistake. After their work is done, they must forget that anything of the sort ever took place. You understand me?"

"Like a book. I kin call 'em over to ye right off, boss!"

"Never mind the names. I don't care about knowing them, nor must they know me. If you like, let them think it's a game put up by yourself. If not, use any name you please, just so you don't compromise me too pointedly."

"I'll be keeful, boss. What's to be did? When, whar an' how? Not that I'm crowdin' of ye, boss," with an apologetic grin; "but ef they's any work to be did this night, I reckon I'd better be 'rastlin' round to corral them lads, to make dead sure. Eh?"

"Three or four, besides yourself, will be sufficient. Go collect them, then leaving them *some* place where you can depend on picking them up without delay, return here. If I am not in, wait for me."

While speaking Damon Wingfold was bustling about, all activity. He secured his hat, put out the light, unlocked the door and held it open for the exit of the burly rough as he hastily muttered the final instructions. Lop-eared Mose nodded his perfect comprehension, then hastened away on his mission. Wingfold secured the office door, after which he hurried away in an almost opposite direction to that in which the Droop-eared Daisy had already vanished from view.

Apparently Damon Wingfold had fully decided on the course he was to pursue, for he showed not the slightest signs of doubt or hesitation in his movements, and a few minutes later was rapping lightly at an office door somewhat similar to his own.

A light shone dimly through a curtained window, and though not a sound came from the interior before his rapping awoke a hollow echo, the speculator seemed confident that the office was occupied. A grunt and a growl came indistinctly to his ears, and as he rapped again, with a peculiar succession of knocks, a deep, rumbling voice responded:

"Hello! what's up?"

"You want to be up, sleepy-head! Open up. Business, man!" responded Wingfold, his lips close to the keyhole.

"You, is it? Wait a bit. Just taking my forty winks!"

In a few moments the door was opened by a big, burly man, whose half-closed eyes and tangled shock of hair bore evidence how he had been occupied when disturbed by the speculator.

"Are your wits awake, Dimple?" sharply demanded Wingfold, staring keenly into the heavy, reddened eyes as though to read the answer to his own question.

"Wide awake if you need them, Wingfold."

"I do need them, else why would I come here to look you up? Are they bright enough to see just as much as I wish them to see, and no further?"

"Try them."

But as though to make assurance doubly sure, Dimple stepped aside into a little back room, from whence came the sounds of splashing water and vigorous rubbing. He reappeared, glowing and damp, but plainly wide awake and in readiness for business.

Damon Wingfold was sitting beside the little square desk, one hand partially covering a number of bank-notes. There was a quick glitter in Dimple's eyes as they, seemingly by instinct, fell upon the notes, and as Wingfold turned his head aside to cough, shielding his lips with the same hand that had weighted down the money, Dimple hustled forward and with a dirty hankiechief vigorously dusted off the desk. With the dust vanished the notes!

"I'm ready, if you are, Mr. Wingfold," he said, seating himself and assuming an attitude of close attention. "Anything in my line—"

"A couple of papers, judge. One a warrant for the arrest of a certain cripple known through town as Humpy Dick, on a charge of murdering—say Richard Roe. The other a search-warrant which will give bearers authority to enter the premises of Maurice Wingfold."

Though the judge was evidently prepared for some sort of "scaly" business, this took him by

surprise, and he sat staring open-eyed at the foxy villain who so calmly uttered those requests. Damon Wingfold bent forward in his seat, smiling until he showed the tips of his yellow teeth, his greenish-gray eyes glittering brightly. His voice was soft and purring, but underneath ran a certain menace that blanched the full florid face of the justice as he listened:

"Will you be so kind, my dear fellow? Or did I speak too low for your ears to catch my exact meaning?"

"I heard you plain enough, but—"

"You don't care for the job?" smiled the speculator.

"It looks mighty risky!"

"Any more so than to refuse, think you, Dimple?"

"I don't refuse, but—"

"Then fill out the papers as I tell you," sharply interposed Damon Wingfold, throwing off his silken manner and shaking a bony finger before the whitened face of his tool. "No harm shall come to you. No return will ever be made, if everything goes well, and you pick out the right sort of men to make the arrest."

"Then it's all on the square?" with a sudden lighting up of his heavy countenance. "Humpy Dick really downed a man?"

"Really and truly," coolly nodded Wingfold. "Make out the papers in due form, and add whatever name you please for the informant. The document will never be placed on record I tell you."

Dimple was silenced, if not convinced, and busily scratched away for a few moments, reluctantly passing the papers over to Wingfold, who rapidly glanced over them with a practiced eye. Apparently they were satisfactory, for he nodded as he passed them back again, saying:

"Now I want you to go and pick out three stout fellows to serve under me. Of course they must be the genuine article, or with the outward semblance, at least. No," with a sharp nod as he saw a quick light leap into the other's eyes. "On second thoughts, they must be simon-pure policemen. You will bring them back here with you, and by the time you have given them their instructions, I will be along to lead them to the right place. You understand?"

"I only wish I did!" muttered the judge, dejectedly.

"Follow instructions and you can't make a mistake," grinned Damon Wingfold and he rose and put on his hat. "I will be back here inside of half an hour. You will have three policemen here before the lapse of that period. I'll attend to the rest. Good-evening!"

He left the building and hurried back to his own office. As he reached the door, Lop-eared Mose stepped out from the shadow, and met his employer with a broad grin that told of perfect success.

"Boys on hand, boss, ready for work."

"Good!" ejaculated Wingfold, opening the door and entering, followed by the Droop-eared Daisy. "Sit down a moment while I strike a light. A few words of instruction will do you no harm."

Sawyer was grave, even anxious as Damon Wingfold turned from the lamp and glanced into his face. Evidently he was hardly sure of his footing as yet.

"You have secured your men, you say? How many?"

"Five; but they're a hull rijiment when it comes to hot work."

"There will be only three men to handle, and with the advantages of a surprise on your side, you can hardly fail."

"Not ef we know jest what to do, jest what end we're to reach, boss," soberly responded the shoulder-bitter.

"I have sworn out a warrant charging Humpy Dick with murder. I am going to place that warrant into the hands of three policemen to serve. I will lead them to the house where you run the crippled rascal to earth, and take him or his dead body!"

"I don't reckon he's a corpus, jist yit, boss."

"I hope not," with a momentary scowl. "That would call for a change of programme, while if he is living, the arrangements I have made will surely bring us what we want most."

A sudden glow filled the bloodshot eyes of Mose Sawyer, as he believed he had caught the idea.

"Three o' us is to play cops, fer the other three to bounce an' snatch off the cripple? Ain't that it, boss?"

"The policemen will do the capturing. I thought of your plan, but the closer we trim our sails to the law, the less risk we run of running on a reef. They may make a fight about admitting us, and even call for the police to test the matter. In a case of that sort, you fellows would hardly know how to carry it off in your borrowed plumes," laughed the schemer.

"Durn the buttons—I don't like to bother with 'em!" muttered Lop-eared Mose, dubiously. "S'pose one of 'em happens to know—"

"You are not to form one of the party. I will guide the officers to the spot. You will simply stand ready to make a dash when the police appear with their prisoner. You can indulge your spite on the buttons as much as you please, only make sure of the cripple!"

"Then I'll send in one lick fer old times, you

bet!" chuckled the bruiser, doubling his huge fists and striking out in swift succession, as though his hereditary enemies were already at his mercy.

"Don't let your grudge cause you to lose sight of the main point, though," warningly added Wingfold. "If you can secure the chart without any further bother, all right; but make sure it is the right document before you lose your hold. If you can't come at it, hang on to the crooked imp as you would to your own life! Take him to a safe place, where you can lay low until you get word to me. I'll see to the rest. You fully understand the part you are to play?"

Lop-eared Mose nodded his head, grim satisfaction written in every line of his battle-scarred face. This was much better than he had anticipated. He would be running little risks of coming into too close contact with the law. For mere personal danger, for hard knocks or anything of that sort, he had a perfect contempt.

"We'll do up our sheer like a book, boss!" he grinned.

"Good enough! Now get your men and take them near the house. Lay low, so you can see without being seen. When we enter the building, get all ready to play your part. Humpy Dick must be taken, let the cost to the police be what it may. If they show fight, so much the worse for them! Down them—swift and sure!"

"I'll post the boys on that p'int, boss," chuckled Mose, as he rose to his feet. "They ain't dead in love with the buttons, an' they'll put plenty o' steam into tha'r licks—you bet!"

Damon Wingfold let his burly tool pass out, then closed and locked the door behind himself. He glided rapidly back to the office of his other tool, Judge Dimple, where he found that worthy and three policemen awaiting his coming.

"Waiting for you, Mr. Wingfold," briskly cried the judge, as he answered the rap of that genius, who entered the office after him. "I hardly think it is necessary for me to give you a formal introduction to these fine fellows?"

"Few men in Denver are so well known," smiled one of the officers.

"And not one cares less for idle compliments," bluntly interposed the speculator. "Especially when there is such serious work on hand as now. These men understand what is expected of them, judge?"

"That information has been laid against one Humpy Dick, for whose arrest, dead or alive, a warrant is now placed in your hands," briskly spoke the judge, handing a paper to the officer.

"This gentleman will guide you to the place where the criminal is supposed to be harboring. Here is a search-warrant, should you experience any difficulty in gaining admittance. I think that is all!"

"Humpy Dick!" muttered the officer, surprise overcoming his habitual self-possession. "I heard a rumor of his being mixed up in that row over—"

"Are the papers made out in regular form?" tartly demanded the judge, in obedience to a quick glance from his master.

"I believe so, sir," bowed the officer, flushing.

"Then all we have to do is to carry out instructions, and I am in readiness if you are, gentlemen," coldly uttered Wingfold, turning toward the door, which was opened for them by the judge.

With a rapid step Damon Wingfold led the policemen direct to the somewhat isolated building occupied by his cousin and niece. The house showed only a dim light through the stained glass transom over the front door, and another in the second story, which Damon knew was the chamber in which his half-brother lay ill.

He stepped aside to allow the officers to first ascend the low steps before the door, as he did so casting a keen glance around in quest of Lop-eared Mose and his fellows. A smile curled his thin lips as he caught a brief glimpse of several dusky, phantom like figures creeping nearer the spot. All was working well on the outside! If all should prove as favorable to his hopes indoors!

Sharply the officer who assumed the lead rapped on the door, but some little time elapsed without an answer! Not until Damon Wingfold was beginning to curse and fume and suspect a serious balk, did they catch the sound of rapid footsteps inside the building.

"What is it? This is a house of sickness, and—"

"Open the door, and there'll be less danger of disturbing your sick man," bluntly interposed the officer, the waiting having ruffled his temper not a little.

"Come again at a reasonable hour, if you have any business of—"

"Will you open, or shall we burst the lock?"

"I wouldn't advise you to try that on, my fine fellow!" laughed Rex Stuart, who was playing for time, as bidden by Dark Durg. "I'll make a clean tunnel through the one who first shows himself at an opening of that sort!"

"Open in the name of the law! I know you, Rex Stuart!" cried Damon Wingfold, flashing out at this unexpected check.

"Not near so well as you will if you don't take yourself off and stop kicking up such a disgraceful row!"

Now that the truth was out, which he had preferred to keep shady lest the criminal try to escape, if only by suicide, the officer added:

"We have a warrant for a man who is in this house. We have another, giving us the right to enter this or any other house which we feel like searching. I tell you this to save hard feelings, and now it is told—open your doors or we'll burst them in!"

"Why didn't you say as much in the first place?" growled Rex.

"We say it now. Will you open the door?"

"When I know you have the right of search you lay claim to. Push your warrant under the door, and if it is all straight, I'll open."

"Burst the door down!" snarled Damon Wingfold.

"I'll kill the first one that tries it! Show your authority first, or do your worst—and I'll do my best!"

There was so much "pure business" in the voice and words that the officer deemed it best to lose a few moments more time, rather than run the risk of losing something of still greater value to himself and his family. So, with some little difficulty, he managed to slip the search-warrant under the door, while Damon Wingfold snapped his teeth and hopped from one foot to the other in an agony of hot impatience.

Daring delay no longer, Rex Stuart turned the key and opened the door, saying sternly:

"I protest against this shameful outrage, but am forced to submit. There is no such criminal here. You will see as much, when your search is made, which I trust you will conduct as quietly as possible. Mr. Wingfold is lying very ill, and—"

"While we're talking here, the murderer is making his escape!" the speculator snarled, pushing forward, only to be caught by Stuart and flung back with more force than ceremony.

"You are not an officer of the law. Hold your hush, keep your place, or I'll boot you from here clean across the street!"

At a word from the officer who acted as chief, one of the policemen stopped by the front door, the others passing at once up-stairs to the chambers. And though Rex Stuart saw that they were actually looking at the door of the chamber where he had left Humpy Dick and Dark Durg, he dared make no further attempt to delay them.

His heart leaped into his throat as he saw the officer grasp the knob and turn it, for he expected to see it resist the pressure, or if it opened, to behold Dark Durg leap out to attack the enemy.

Instead, the door swung quietly open, showing all dark within. With a swift motion the officer opened the slide of his lantern, flashing a brilliant stream of light across the interior, then stepping across the threshold. And still there came no sound, no sign, no outbreak!

Puzzled, bewildered, knowing not what to think, Rex Stuart pressed forward and took in the whole scene at a single glance.

Neither Dark Durg nor Humpy Dick were visible.

The bed was smoothed over. The bloody cloths which he had seen on the washstand were no longer there. Not a sign remained to tell of the wounded, dying cripple whom he had so recently left lying helpless on the bed.

Despite his strong nerves, Rex Stuart could not entirely conceal his emotions, and the officer gazed at him suspiciously. The young man forced a light laugh, saying:

"Not being a policeman, armed with the panoply of law and justice, I can't help blushing a little at invading a lady's chamber. But don't mind me. I have to do it, as I feel accountable for any little valuables which might accidentally stick to your clothes."

"Don't listen to him!" snapped Damon Wingfold. "He's playing for time! I know the murderer was here, and if you let him slip—"

"You cur!" grated Stuart, springing forward, forgetting the age and gray hairs of the speaker, only remembering how mercilessly this villain was persecuting the woman he loved better far than life.

But he paused abruptly, without touching the hoary scoundrel.

Outside, coming apparently from the rear of the building, rung the sharp report of a pistol, blended with or closely followed by a wild yell as of mortal agony.

For an instant the party stood as though spellbound, but then Damon Wingfold, cursing viciously, cried out:

"I knew it! You've let that devil slip through your fingers! Out and take him! A thousand dollars for his body, dead or alive!"

CHAPTER X.

BEATEN AT ALL POINTS.

REX STUART made no effort to hinder or delay Damon Wingfold as the latter sprang toward the head of the stairs with that cursing howl of spiteful rage. He could not believe the yell or the pistol-shot came from Dark Durg, whom he had so recently left in the now deserted chamber with a dead or dying man. Though

puzzled to account for the disappearance and the renovated condition of the room, he felt no doubt as to their being still within the house, and if for that reason alone he stood aside to permit the policemen to follow the lead of Damon Wingfold, now leaping, almost tumbling down the first flight of stairs in his mad haste to reach the outer air.

"Kick 'em down! One for me! Do it myself, but—scat!" came in short, explosive puffs from the darkened chamber devoted to Nettie Malcolm, the maid of Precious Wingfold.

"You fat brute! I'll tell—I'll holler murder, I'll—"

Doctor Shipley came hurriedly out of the chamber, his fat face bearing more than one deep red mark, very like those produced by the weapons of the animal he apparently addressed.

"Good Lord! Mad! Red-hot! Won't stand it, I tell you! Throw up the case. Madmen first. Criminals next. Now—cat with fifty claws! Look nice to go back to wife of bosom—eh?"

Despite his great anxiety for the result of the strange adventure into which he had hurried without time for thought or reasoning, Rex Stuart could not help laughing at the comical picture thus presented, to say nothing of the utter disgust which accompanied those explosive sentences.

"Laugh. Lots of fun. Idiot, sir!"

"A brute, you mean?" snapped Nettie, flushed and in unusual disorder for one remarkable for her demure smoothness and propriety. "If there's any law in the land for a poor, abused, insulted girl—"

"Scat!" and Doctor Shipley turned upon the maid with an upward flourish of his short arms. "Hold your tongue. Go to bed. Go to the—ahem! Will you speak to the—the lady, dear boy? I can't. I'm worn out. She would holler and kick at the door. I wanted her to be still, but wouldn't. Went in. Coaxed. Threatened. Look!" and, bending forward, he tapped his little pug nose, from which the blood was trickling. "A cat. Thousand cats, wrapped up in one hide! Scat!"

"A goat, more like it—and that's you, Doctor Shipley!" retorted Nettie, for once in her life showing her real quality without disguise. "I'll make you smart worse than my ten fingers have! I'll make you pay through the nose, if there's any law for a poor, unprotected girl."

Rex Stuart stepped quickly in front of the doctor as Nettie advanced, his face stern, his finger lifted warningly.

"Think twice before you go to law, my good girl. Lawyers ask some pretty awkward questions, once in a while. Instead—go back into your chamber and stay there until you are called."

"I never—I won't stay to—oh, dear!" and, with a hysterical sob, the maid beat a retreat, turning the key in the lock with a spiteful emphasis.

Leaving Doctor Shipley to eagerly assure the young man that he had only acted as he deemed best for the safety of the wounded cripple, and that the little cat kept him far too busy to afford time for taking notes as to what was going on in the other room, we will follow Damon Wingfold and his allies out of the house to the scene of the disturbance which he, right or wrong, at once connected with the flight of Sterling Coin, alias Humpy Dick.

Through the dimly lighted hall, down the steps and around the corner to the rear of the house he ran, and only for an awkward trip and fall, he would have outstripped even the eager police. As it was, he regained his feet and hastened forward just in time to see the chief pounce upon a struggling figure lying in the alley-way.

"Hold him! Don't let him get away!" he snarled, making a savage grasp at the prostrate figure, only to utter a fierce curse of mingled surprise and chagrin as he recognized—not Humpy Dick, but Lop-eared Mose Sawyer!

"Air—I'm chokin'!" hoarsely gasped the rough, with a hollow rattling in his throat that sounded so much like death that the officer at once relaxed his professional grip.

Lop-eared Mose retained life enough, however, to roll over, thus bringing himself close to Damon Wingfold, who caught a warning hiss and instantly stooped over his employee to catch:

"Game up! Git me away! Dark Durg done it!"

For a moment Damon Wingfold stood stupefied, but it was only for an instant. He realized the peril which threatened, and catching at the well-known name muttered by Mose, he cried out hastily:

"This is one of my men, and he swears that Dark Durg knocked him down as he tried to stop him! No doubt he is aiding the criminal to escape! Follow—find him—a thousand dollars for each one, if you kill or capture! Off—I'll follow as soon—"

He did not complete his sentence, for that would be wasting breath for no good. At that name, the police darted away in the direction Lop-eared Mose was pointing, almost instantly disappearing from view as they left the alley for the wider street.

"Where is he? Your men got him, eh?" hur-

riedly gasped the speculator as he stooped to aid the desperado in rising.

"Let's git out o' this afore them cussed blues come back!" panted Sawyer, who really seemed to be injured. "Easy—cuss the devil!"

"In here we'll be hidden enough," muttered Damon Wingfold, leading the way through a gate which led from the narrow yard to the alley.

Smothering a groan, Lop-eared Mose staggered after him.

"Where are they? Where is he? Did you have to shoot him down?"

Damon Wingfold hopped nervously from foot to foot, rubbing his bony hands, his eyes glowing redly as he glared at the ruffian.

"Gone, durn 'em both!" growled Lop-eared Mose, leaning against the fence, giving a painful gasp as he spoke.

Damon Wingfold staggered back as though a heavy fist had been dashed in his face. The truth flashed upon him, and for a moment it sickened him, causing his very heart to cease its functions. But he would not believe it. He rallied, with a faint, rasping laugh.

"Gone—with you gallant lads, of course! But where?"

"To the devil! With the devil! Gone, I say, an' that means gone for good this bout! Humpy Dick an' Dark Durg—devil roast him!"

"You lie!" snarled the old man, trembling like a leaf, but crouching as a savage wild beast crouches when on the point of making its death-leap. "You want to cheat me! You think to play the cross! Where is he? curse you. If you've let him escape—"

The mere thought drove him wild, and he leaped at the throat of the burly ruffian, snarling and growling viciously, his bony fingers trying to close about that bull-neck.

With a low, grating curse, Lop-eared Mose drew back his heavy fist and struck the madman down, seeming about to follow up his vantage to the death. But then he checked his passion with a short, hard laugh.

He stood over the prostrate figure, but hearing the opening and closing of a door, and catching sight of a figure coming through the yard, he grasped Damon Wingfold and crouched low down in the deepest shade, holding one hand firmly over the mouth of his employer, the other clutching the butt of a revolver as he recognized the tall, athletic form of the young man who had so bravely risked his life in defense of Humpy Dick a few hours earlier in the evening.

It was Stuart, coming to investigate the cause of that wild yell and the pistol-shot. Luckily for himself, he passed on through the gate without detecting those crouching figures. Had he noticed them, and made any effort to see who and what they were, Lop-eared Mose would have had another life on his soul!

Breathlessly the desperado listened, still holding Damon Wingfold prostrate and powerless, only relaxing his grasp when his keen ears told him that Rex Stuart had passed through the alley and on into the street. Still, it was highly probable he might return the same way, and ignoring his injuries, which were more than enough to lay an ordinary man flat on his back, Mose lifted Wingfold to his feet and hurried him into the alley, taking a direction opposite to the one in which their enemy had disappeared.

"Hold your hush ontel we git out o' the wilderness, boss," he muttered guardedly, yet with a return of his usual manner.

Damon made no response, even when Lop-eared Mose cut across an unoccupied lot and paused in a sheltered spot where they could see without too much danger of being seen in return.

"Ax your pardon fer bein' so rude as to knock ye down, boss," muttered Mose with a faint grin, "but you would hev it!"

"How was it all? How did he escape? Curse you for an idiot!" and his enforced composure again gave way before the flood of chagrin and frustrated hopes.

Lop-eared Mose tapped his arm meaningly, and there was a warning note in his voice as he made reply:

"Go light on that, boss, ef you please! I done even more then the 'greement called fer, an' cusses is mighty tough pay, I think!"

"He escaped—you let him slip through your fingers, when you knew how much depended on his capture!"

"Go slow, boss, an' you won't be nigh so apt to trip over your own heels. What was I to do? Says you, lay low ontel we fetch out the critter, then bounce the blues an' freeze onto the cripple. That was what we was to do. You was to fetch him out. Waal, did you do it? Ef you did an' we slipped up on it, then, you'd hev a right to jaw an' sling cuss words in our teeth. Eh?"

Damon Wingfold knew that Mose had the best of the argument, and he began to see that he was acting anything but wisely. If Humpy Dick had escaped, all the more reason for him to keep on good terms with a man who was as ready to do dirty work as this rough.

It was hard work, but he managed to smother his rage for the moment, and caught the hand of his tool in both of his own, muttering:

"I was wrong—I was too excited to reason

closely. Forget it, my good fellow, and—how did it happen? You are sure you made no mistake? It was Humpy Dick you saw?"

"An' Dark Durg I felt, boss," with a sickly grin, pressing one hand to his chest as though in sore pain.

"That demon, too!" gasped Wingfold, shivering as though an icy gust had swept across his heated skin.

"Ef I'd only knowed the critter, fu'st off!" grated Lop-eared Mose, with a vicious snort. "But this was the way, boss. We was on the watch, ready fer work when the right time come. But when you was so long in gittin' inside, thinks I thar's a monkey in the woodpile, an' so I took a walk 'round the back way, to make sure they wasn't playin' bugs onto you. The odds was ag'in' it, I thought, but mebbe they might try a slip-out one side while you was hammerin' at t'other, an' I'm a howlin' liar ef they didn't, too!"

"You saw them leave the house, then?"

"Not jest that, but when I got to the alley, I hearn a door shet or a winder let down, back o' the house, an' I lay low. A bit later, I see a man comin' out the gate, totin' a big bun'le in his arms. Fu'st-off I didn't think o' Humpy, but then I ketched a clearer sight, an' knowed he was that same bun'le!"

Damon Wingfold uttered a groaning curse.

"If you'd only sent a bullet home!"

"You didn't want too big a bobbery kicked up, an' then I thought I could easy skeer the cuss into drappin' his hold. Ef I'd even dreamed o' its bein' Dark Durg—but I didn't, wuss luck!"

"The devil's own luck!" grated the specula-

tor. "Wasn't it? An' when I jumped out an' kivered the critter, tellin' him to wait a bit, durned ef a cyclone didn't knock me ten feet! Didn't hev time to pull trigger, even! Lot the gun too quick! An' afore I could tell which end my head was on, the dirty whelp was tromplin' me with hoofs that weighed two ten apiece!"

"I heard a pistol-shot out—"

"That was my other gun. But afore I could pull it an' git my eyes well open, Dark Durg was critter-back an' totin' Humpy Dick on one arm like he was a nussin' baby!"

"You bit one of them? It was his yell we heard?"

"Hit or no hit, they didn't stop. I yelled fer the boys to take him, an' I reckon that's what you hearn. I was too bad mixed up to remember they was on the other street."

Lop-eared Mose caught his breath sharply, pressing his chest. He was injured, how seriously even himself could only guess.

Damon Wingfold stood for a brief space, his head bowed, his voice growling and snarling in his chest. To have all so snugly in his grasp, only to meet with defeat at every point! It was doubly hard!

Though Lop-eared Mose had told such a plain, straightforward tale, and seemed so positive that both Dark Durg and Humpy Dick had won clear, he would not altogether abandon hope.

"I'm going back to the house and make sure!" he muttered, with a sudden rousing from his gloomy thoughts. "You look up your fellows, Mose, and be ready to make a dash if I give the word."

He did not wait for a reply, but strode rapidly to the street and along it until he reached the house occupied by his half-brother. He half-expected to find the front door fastened, but it was ajar, and he entered without stopping to rap or ring. As he rapidly ran up the stairs, there was an ugly, vicious devil in his greenish eyes.

At the top of the flight he hesitated, glancing swiftly around him as though at a loss just what course to pursue. It might be possible that Humpy Dick was still an inmate of the house, hidden away in one of the chambers. Should he attempt to search them without making his presence known? This doubt was solved for him by the appearance of Doctor Shipley, who opened the door of the sick-room and stepped into the hall, stopping short as he caught sight of Damon Wingfold.

"Infernal scoundrel! What you doing here? Get out! Scat!"

There was little love lost between the two. Doctor Shipley was the family physician, and as such could hardly avoid discovering the real state of the case. He knew that this man was persecuting both Maurice and Precious Wingfold, the last named being to him much as a dear daughter.

Damon was not in a humor to be readily bluffed off, and advanced with a dogged front, saying:

"Get out of the way. I want to see my brother."

"Won't. Sha'n't. Get out you! Sick—crazy with the infernal row you've kicked up. Kick you—do me good!" exploded the irascible physician, looking as pugnacious as a turkey cock.

"Put the weight of your little finger on me, and I'll lay you out too cold to quack, even!" angrily grated Wingfold, thrusting one hand into his bosom and advancing.

After all, the doctor, as worthy a soul as ever drew the breath of life, was not cut out for a

fighting man. And then, even a bold man might have been excused for shrinking from those evil eyes, full of a deadly menace.

But as the physician retreated past the chamber door, it was suddenly opened and Precious Wingfold stepped forth, closing the barrier behind her, confronting her uncle.

"You are out of your place, Mr. Wingfold," she said, coldly, one hand pointing to the head of the stairs. "Leave this house, sir!"

"After I've seen my brother."

"You can't see him. He is lying very low, brought there by your outrageous conduct, which nothing can excuse but—"

"My being in search of a murderer, whom you were giving aid and shelter, my fine lady!" he viciously interposed. "Stand aside. I will see my brother. He has got to explain how—"

"I will explain—through this!" and Precious quickly drew her right hand from where it had been hidden in the folds of her dress.

Damon Wingfold was staring full into the muzzle of a revolver!

Before he could utter a word or make another move, swift footsteps echoed on the stairs, and a mighty hand grasped him by the neck, cutting off all sounds save a smothered gasp.

"You cur!" sternly muttered Rex Stuart, turning the rascal about and forcing him to the head of the stairs. "Insult a lady, will you?"

Down the flight he hurried him, kept only from falling headlong by that savage grip on his neck. Through the hall and to the open door.

"One last word, you hoary scoundrel!" grated the enraged athlete as he twisted the helpless wretch around until their eyes could meet. "Only for your gray hairs, I'd have broken every bone in your worthless carcass! As it is—take my card with you—so!"

He pushed Damon Wingfold over the threshold, then swung forward his leg and foot, fairly lifting the old man from his feet, and sending him flying end over end into the middle of the street.

And when Damon Wingfold sought to arise, he heard the heavy doors close behind him.

"Shell we clean out the shebang, boss?" muttered a husky voice in his ears as strong hands aided him to regain his feet. "We'll gut the place ef you give the word—won't we, lads?"

"Bet your sweet life!"

"That's what!"

"An' say thankee in the barg'in, too!"

"They ought to be good pickin' in yender, sure!"

"An' mebbe some hard knocks, too!" wound up the last of the quintette, more prudent than his fellows.

Damon Wingfold stared dizzily at the ruffians, shrinking away from them as though he anticipated further rough handling. Lop-eared Mose saw this, and motioned his fellows to fall back a little. They promptly obeyed, and then he muttered in a low tone:

"They're the lads I told ye of, boss. They mean you well, an' ef you want to git even-up with that durned kicker—"

"Sometime—not now. I'm too much shaken up. Get rid of them without letting them know too much, then come to my office."

His tones were so husky and shaken that Lop-eared Mose hesitated.

"Shan't I go with ye, boss? Think ye kin make it alone? Mebbe you're wuss shook up then you think, right now. It was the awk'ardest bit o' tumblin' I've see'd fer this many a long day!"

"I'm all right. Do as I say, will you?" snapped the other rascal, as he turned and hobbled rapidly away.

Hurt he was, but worse a great deal in mind than in person. He could not spare thoughts for his bruises, though they must have been quite severe. He could only think of how utterly his hopes were blasted! So sure of success! So utterly defeated, and beaten at every point!

He reached his office and struck a light. He produced a decanter of brandy from his safe, and pouring out a glass even full, drained it off at a swallow. And then, with his elbows on the table and his face clasped by his thin hands, he stared at vacancy, muttering, snarling, cursing as he thought over the events of that memorable night.

And thus he sat when Lop-eared Mose rapped at the door, adding his private signal that there might be no mistake. Damon Wingfold opened the door and gave him admittance, pouring a glass of brandy for the bruised and battered rough before saying a word.

"I've sent the boys off, boss, but they're ready whenever you want them fer work," said Sawyer, emptying the glass and dropping into a chair with a wry grin. "Durn that Dark Durg! I kin feel his hoofs in every ounce o' my karkiss!"

"Gold will save your hurts, my fine fellow," said Wingfold, now to all outward appearance as cool and composed as though everything had prospered with him instead of going crooked. "I can't spare you even for an hour. You must go on duty at once. I want you to keep your eye on that Rex Stuart. You know him by sight?"

"I've see'd him," replied Mose, hastily lifting one hand as though to brush off his big mustach-

es, but in reality to hide the grim smile that would come as he remembered how he had seen that young man last!

"I believe that Humpy Dick and Dark Durg are in league with my brother and that Stuart. I can't explain just why, but I believe neither of the first took the chart away with them. If not, I'll soon be certain, but until I can receive that assurance, you must keep a close watch over young Stuart. Follow him wherever he goes. Make a note of all he does, and don't let him slip you, if you have to hire good shadows to aid you in keeping him under surveillance."

"Then it's only watchin', boss? You don't want a knife slipped atwixt his short-ribs?" a little greedily asked the desperado.

"It may come to that—curse him! But not until I know for sure that he carries that paper, as something tells me. Then—but time enough for that. Do you want any money?"

"It wouldn't come amiss, boss," with a grin. "Men that kin play shadows ain't workin' fer fun, these days!"

Damon Wingfold gave the rough some money, then opened the door and bade him at once begin his duties. Lop-eared Mose grinned assent. And when the desperado strode away, Damon Wingfold relocked the door, sat himself down by the table, thinking—thinking.

CHAPTER XI.

A GOLD PHANTOM FOR A BRIDE.

IT WAS with a certain degree of satisfaction that Rex Stuart closed the door after having kicked Damon Wingfold into the middle of the street. He felt that he had in part canceled the debt owing that unworthy branch of the family, and could he have the same chance at the son as fortune had given him at the father, he would be willing to wipe out the old score and begin anew.

"Fine fellow—shake!" exploded Doctor Shipley as he met the young man near the foot of the stairs, grasping his hand and working it pump-handle fashion, his fat face all aglow, radiant with delight. "Done it myself, but legs too short. Infernal scoundrel, sir! Blackleg. Common swindler. Steal a sheep. Good kick. Do it over some more. Ever so much more. Pay for your boot-leather, gladly. Me. Yes, sir!"

Stuart returned the grasp with sufficient good-will, but he hardly took time to acknowledge the hearty greeting as it deserved, for at the head of the stairs he saw Precious waiting, and twisting his hands free from the little physician, he rapidly continued his ascent.

"Go it strong!" chuckled the doctor, rubbing his fat hands together as he watched the meeting, nodding his bald head so emphatically as to shake the gold-bowed glasses from their proper resting-place. "Been there myself! Fun. Immense! Food and drink and lodging. Get fat on it. Glorious fun!"

Coughing and hemming he slowly mounted the steps, almost closing his fat lids as he turned his face in the direction where the lovers had gone, firmly resolved that he would squint his eyes out rather than allow them to surprise a lovely secret. But this was a precaution wasted. Precious and Rex were standing near the open door of the room from whence Humpy Dick and Dark Durg had so mysteriously vanished, apparently busily engaged in converse.

"Good children—awful!" the doctor grunted, his eyes opening wide again. "Trust 'em anywhere. Gallant lad! Infernal idiot, though! Been me—hug and kiss. Muss and rumple. Earned it. Take it, then!"

He turned abruptly as he caught a faint sound from the chamber occupied by Nettie Malcom. His fat face turned red as a peony, and his pompous crest began to droop at once.

"Scat! Look out fer mousers! Can't stop any longer! Sick man. Want me bad. Good-by. Keep your eye skinned, young fellow!"

After all, the little doctor was not so much to blame. He had only tried his level best to carry out the orders given by Rex Stuart when so much depended upon the gaining of a little time.

He held the door closed against Nettie Malcom until that little angel in disguise waxed wroth and attacked the barrier with fists and shoe-leather. So much noise did she make that Doctor Shipley changed his tactics, opening the door and stepping inside to argue the case.

For some reason, Nettie was determined to leave the chamber, and could only be prevented by main force. The result we have seen.

Precious glanced at Rex in wonder as the doctor flung those words at them as he retreated hastily in the direction of the sick-room.

"He means your maid, dearest," was the guarded response to the silent question. "She has acted very suspiciously this evening, and I am almost tempted to believe she is a spy on your actions, in the employ of those unmitigated scoundrels, your uncle and cousin!"

But Precious was too loyal to believe ill of her little maid, who had served her so long. No one could be so utterly vile, after being treated as one of the family, as a companion and friend, rather than a paid servant.

"Poor Nettie! You are prejudiced, Rex, I'm afraid."

"But the doctor, who—"

He cut himself short, seeing the look of pain that filled her eyes. After all, what matter? Unless he had been listening to the baseless dreams of a madman that night, a few days more would complete the discomfiture of their enemies. And as long as he knew on whom the enemy counted for inside information, what harm could she work?

The thoughts revived that perplexing mystery, and, drawing Precious nearer the open chamber, he spoke guardedly:

"Can you throw any light on this subject, little one? I was gone barely five minutes—"

"An age, when so much depends on prompt action, Rex," half-laughed the maiden, but with a troubled, doubting look in her eyes as she turned them upon her lover. "Was it right? Did I sin, dear Rex, in helping that man escape?"

"You, Precious?" ejaculated Stuart, looking all the surprise he really felt.

She nodded, nestling closer to his side as she led the way into the chamber, pointing out through the window as she spoke.

The repeated rapping had drawn her from the sick-chamber just as she caught a glimpse of Rex Stuart going down the steps to answer the peremptory summons. At his first words she instinctively recognized the peril that threatened, and as she caught sight of Dark Durg crossing before the open door of her chamber, she hastened thither.

Though she could not divine by what means he had secured an entrance, Precious recognized the strange being who had come so opportunely on the scene of the fight, and at once recognized a friend to the wounded cripple. The Ishmael of the Hills seemed equally confident as to her good will, and at once begged her aid in foiling the enemy. And after he mentioned the name of Damon Wingfold, Precious was only too eager to do what lay in her power.

Wrapping Humpy Dick in the blood-stained coverlet, Dark Durg opened the rear window, stepping out with his helpless burden to the sloping roof of the kitchen, sliding from thence to the ground, then beating a retreat through the back-yard to the alley, where Lop-eared Mose was more surprised than surpriser.

Precious did not wait to see all this, however, but, closing the window, she at once acted on the hasty advice given her by Dark Durg.

She quickly restored the bed to its customary appearance, flung the bloody cloths and bandages into a closet, then beat a quick retreat to the sick-chamber, just as she heard Rex Stuart opening the front door to admit the enemy.

"I was afraid they would read the truth in my face, if I came forth before I was actually obliged to show myself," she added. "Did I act so very wrongly, Rex?"

His lips touched hers, and his strong arms pressed her to his bosom with tender love. He was satisfied with her, and Precious was quite content, now.

"If you had done less, little girl, I believe you would never have forgiven yourself," he said, earnestly as he took the worn chart from his bosom and once more held it up before her eyes. "This is what that arch villain was working for, and only for you, dear one, he might have secured possession of it, while now—it is your dowry, Precious!"

A soft flush came into her face, only to vanish as quickly.

"It is not ours, Rex. And even if we knew it was as valuable as you think, we could not keep it against—"

"Not against but with the good will of Humpy Dick, Precious," the young man laughed, exultantly. "I have a message to deliver, pet. Humpy Dick, no longer crazy, but in the full possession of his senses, chose you and I as his heirs, bequeathing to us, share and share alike, the golden treasure to which this paper is the clew!"

Holding the worn, faded scrap of paper in both her hands, Precious Wingfold gazed at it with strangely conflicting emotions. But then over all rose the glad thought—

"If it is true—if it is not the idle fancy of a disordered brain—this gold can save poor father, Rex!"

"It shall save him, first of all, little girl," softly uttered the young man. "It shall clear all clouds from his path, and then—will it bring us together, for all time, Precious?"

There was no answer in words, but Rex Stuart was content as he gazed down into those dark, lustrous eyes. Love was pre-eminent, after all, and duty would fare but poorly should it ever come to a pitched battle between them.

Rex told Precious much of what had taken place in that room during her absence, only refraining from dwelling too long on the more repulsive parts of the story. He felt positive that Maurice Wingfold had formed one of that ill-starred expedition, more from what he had heard through occasional gossip, however, during his career as prospector than from the words dropped by Humpy Dick. He felt pretty well assured that black, ugly work had been done on that trip, and he believed Maurice Wingfold, if not one of the worst of the bunch, had proven

himself far from angelic. But what matter? He loved Precious, not Maurice. He wanted the daughter, not the father, for a wife.

"If we can only find the gold in time, Rex!" panted Precious, her face brightly flushed, her breath coming quick and fast with excitement.

"I can and will, lit le girl," was the confident reply. "I'll lose mighty little time in getting down to work, and then, when those cormorants are gorged—when your father has his head fairly above water again, little pet—there's going to be a holy picnic in the black division of your family, Precious!"

"No, Rex," and she clung a little closer to her lover. "We can afford to scorn them, then. Defeat will be punishment enough."

"For them, but not for me. I couldn't face my image in a glass, Precious, were I to—eh, doctor?"

"Didn't want. Had to, though!" nodded the doctor, his face buried in the big handkerchief by the aid of which he had blown the tremendous alarm that caused the lovers to turn toward the door. "Maurice wants to see Precious. Told him she was engaged. Had company. Wouldn't listen. Said call her. So—you see?" and the honest physician concluded it would be safe to open his eyes and dispense with his handkerchief by this time.

What an arrant rogue he must have been in his younger days! Good old soul! after all, the world would be all the better if it contained a more liberal supply of just such characters.

"To-morrow, Rex?" whispered Precious, anxiously.

"I'm going with you, little one," was the whispered but resolute reply. "After what has happened, I have the right."

Precious turned toward the physician, who nodded vigorously.

"Why not? Maurice cracked, not sick. Boy got better medicine than I have. Cure him, right off! Yes. Know it, I tell you!"

"I will tell him all, if you will be so kind as to step in ahead and prepare him for my coming. I am a little out of favor, just now, you see," with a faint smile, "and the unexpected sight of my face might seriously disturb your patient."

"Certainly. Quite right. Tell Maurice you're coming. Half an hour be long enough?" spluttered Doctor Shipley, beaming brightly on the lovers, his fat hands twitching as though they wanted to drop on their heads and invoke a paternal blessing.

"Five minutes, rather," laughed Rex, turning the physician about and pushing him along the passage.

Away waddled the doctor, and Stuart turned to Precious, taking both her hands in his, his face grave, his voice sober.

"Precious, we must understand each other fully, and there is no time like the present. If I can discover this Golden Phantom and return in time to save your father, will you give me my reward?"

"Whatever you ask, Rex," was the low but firm reply.

"Even if your father should still object?"

There was a brief pause, during which the rosy face turned pale, the dark eyes drooped to the floor. In silence Stuart waited, though he felt that his future happiness or misery must hang on the next words her lips uttered.

He was not kept long in suspense. Precious Wingfold raised her eyes and met his eager gaze fairly. And her voice was steady as she spoke the words he most longed to hear:

"Even then, Rex. We both will have done enough for duty."

"And love is lord of all!" fervently breathed the young man, as he drew her yielding figure to his bosom, pressing a burning kiss upon her red lips. And as she returned it, Precious Wingfold felt that no mere form of words could more surely bind their future together.

"And now—for your father, little one," said Rex, with a low, happy laugh. "He will not object, I feel confident, when he hears all that I can tell him. See! the good doctor!"

On tiptoe the physician came out of the sick-chamber, and as they advanced toward him he smiled and nodded vigorously. Evidently the prospects were favorable for the lovers.

They entered the room, finding Maurice Wingfold sitting up in bed, his back supported by pillows, his face looking more natural than it had for weeks. And that he had gained an inkling of the truth was shown by his eager look toward Rex Stuart, even while his thin hand was caressing the dark curls of his daughter, who rushed forward and hid her face on his bosom.

Rex Stuart was doing some hard thinking during those few moments, and now that Precious could not note his actions, he bent his head and hastily whispered in the ear of the doctor:

"She must not hear all I will have to say. Manage to leave me alone with her father. Can you do it?"

"Do anything. Of course. Why not?"

With his brisk step he reached the bedside and gently tapped the daughter on her arm, saying lightly as she turned her face toward him:

"Want you, pet. Business mighty dry.

Leave 'em alone for a bit. Less excitement for patient. See?"

Precious hesitated, glancing from the physician to her lover. Rex slightly inclined his head, and she only paused to press a kiss to the high, bald forehead of her father, murmuring:

"Be kind to him, father, for my sake!"

Doctor Shipley drew her little hand through his arm, and strode out of the sick-chamber with the pompous air of a conqueror.

"Well? What have you got to say that requires so much mystery?" demanded Maurice Wingfold, a trace of suspicion in his voice, much more than a trace glittering in his dark eyes.

"Good news, I sincerely trust, Mr. Wingfold," quietly replied the young man, drawing a chair close to the bedside and sitting down. "Will you oblige me by giving your opinion as to this?"

He placed the worn and soiled bit of paper into the trembling hands of the old man, quietly watching the haggard face.

It was a curious study. At first wonder, mixed with suspicion, but then the changes came swift and startling as those brilliant black eyes roved over the crooked lines and scattered dots. A growing interest. Bewilderment. Doubt. And then—a glad cry as of recognition or remembrance!

"Where did you get this? Who drew it? What does it mean?" Maurice Wingfold gasped, glaring at the young man as he pressed the paper to his panting bosom.

"In a moment, dear sir," was the calm response. "Do you see anything familiar in that paper? Does it recall any memory of the long ago? Does it give the outlines of any spot which you may have visited when you were younger than now—say in the days when Denver was but a rude mining-camp—when you were a prospector?"

As he spoke, Rex Stuart could see the old man turning pale as a corpse—could see his limbs trembling under the cover as though a violent chill was creeping over them; but he knew that he was playing for high and precious stakes, and could not afford to throw away a chance.

"I know! I could go to the very spot!" gasped the old man. "What does it mean? Where did you get this paper?"

"It was given to me by a stranger whom I was fortunate enough to save from robbery, if no worse. He told me it would guide me to a vast amount of gold, which—"

"Is mine—all mine!" hoarsely ejaculated the other, clasping the chart to his bosom and drawing further back in bed, glaring at Rex Stuart as though he anticipated force.

"On certain conditions it may be, or a goodly share of it," was the quiet response, no effort being made to regain possession of the important paper, though Stuart began to fancy he had acted rather rashly in permitting it to leave his hands before a proper understanding was arrived at. "I came here to make you a fair offer, Mr. Wingfold. I came to say that, if you will agree to forget the past few weeks, and to receive me on the same footing as you did at that time—"

With a hollow groan, Maurice Wingfold dropped the chart and covered his face with his hands. Rex Stuart made a quick motion as though to recover the paper, but as quickly restrained the impulse. Perhaps it was as well, for Maurice Wingfold snatched it up and thrust it into his bosom. The effort would have been frustrated by his celerity, and suspicion freshly awakened.

"Impossible! You know not what you say!" muttered the old man.

"I know that unless you can raise \$30,000 before the end of this month, you are ruined. But I also know that, with the aid of the paper you hold and the information given me by the man whose name you will find written on the back of that same paper, I can furnish the amount you need, twice over!"

Rex Stuart paused abruptly, not because he had said all he intended, but Maurice Wingfold glanced at the back of the chart, to fall back in bed, gasping, moaning, seemingly in a convulsion!

Swiftly Rex caught up the paper that dropped from the unnerved fingers, thrusting it into his bosom, then lifted the old man's head on one arm, holding a glass to his lips. With an effort Maurice Wingfold swallowed the cordial, and Stuart whispered hastily:

"Shall I call the doctor?"

Wingfold shook his head, then made a motion with one trembling hand which Stuart interpreted into a wish to be laid down and left to himself. He obeyed, resuming his chair, closely watching the invalid.

A faint smile curled his lips as he saw the bony hand gently, silently moving over the bed, as though searching for something. He had no further fears as to the recovery of the patient after that.

"I have the paper, Mr. Wingfold," he at length uttered, coolly. "As it was given to me by a dying man, I think—"

"What dying man? Whom do you mean? Not—"

"By the man whose name is signed to the paper."

"He is dead! Dead long years ago!" ejaculated Wingfold, starting up in bed with a celerity that spoke well for his chances of ultimate recovery from his strange fit of illness.

"From one whom I believe must be Sterling Coin, as he declared; but let that pass, if you wish," quietly uttered Stuart. "The main point just now is whether we can place any dependence on the rest of his information. I have faith that I can go direct to the spot which this paper describes. If a treasure is really buried there, I have faith that I can unearth it."

"It is mine!" muttered Wingfold, his dark eyes shining redly. "It is the phantom treasure I have chased for so many long years! If you rob me of it now, I'll murder you by inches!"

"So far from wishing to rob you of even a single grain of this treasure, real or fabulous, Mr. Wingfold, I came here to offer you the entire amount—on conditions," slowly added Stuart.

"It is mine by rights, already, but I'll hear what you have to say," muttered the old man, an uneasy gleam in his dark eyes.

"I will make a copy of this chart, giving you the original. I will fit-out and go to the place described, and learn what truth there is in the matter. If I discover any gold, be the amount large or small, I will pledge my honor to turn every grain over to you, if, on your part, you pledge me your sacred word of honor, before your daughter and Doctor Shipley, as witnesses, that you will give me Precious as my wife. Those are my conditions, and nothing less will satisfy me."

Steadily, firmly, the young man spoke, and Maurice Wingfold saw that his decision was irrevocable. He dropped his eyes and seemed to be busily thinking. Then he spoke, huskily:

"You know—Precious has told you?"

"That Damon Wingfold has somehow got you under his thumb, but that if you can raise \$30,000 before the end of the month, he cannot touch you after that. This she has told me, but nothing more definite."

"It is the truth—curse him!" snarled Wingfold, savagely.

"Amen! with all my heart!" was the prompt response. "Make me the promise I ask, and trust to me for foiling the scoundrel. I firmly believe that Sterling Coin—or his representative," correcting himself quickly as Wingfold shrunk back again, "has spoken no more than the truth in swearing that this chart is the clew to a great treasure. I can find it. I will find it!"

"I'll go with you! It is mine by rights, and—"

"You will stay here," sternly interposed Stuart. "Any such move would put Damon Wingfold on his guard, and he would take measures to foil our hopes, if he did not do worse. You will see him as usual, and beg him to spare you. Hang out for the longest reprieve possible. Fool him to the top of his bent, and his confusion will be all the more complete when I come back to set you free. You will do this?"

No need to ask that question! Maurice Wingfold was laughing, harshly and viciously, at the mere thought. And Rex Stuart laughed, too, feeling confident that his point was gained at last.

To clinch it, he rose from his chair and going to the door, summoned Precious and the doctor, who were standing in the hall, awaiting the result of the interview with widely varying emotions.

"Told you so! Knew it. Right. Never wrong. Don't know how!" chuckled the worthy physician as he led his fair companion into the room and stood with his broad back braced against the door, on guard.

Rex led Precious to the bedside, where Maurice Wingfold took their hands and joined them together, speaking hurriedly:

"Keep your promise, Rex Stuart, and I agree that my daughter shall marry you, if she so wishes. Doctor, I call you to witness this pledge."

"Good! Played idiot long enough. Get well, now. Dance at wedding. So will I. Get gloriously drunk, too! So help me Abraham!"

"And that promise is that I will return before the last of the month, to place \$20,000 in the hands of Maurice Wingfold," clearly uttered Stuart, stooping and touching his lips to the brow of the maiden.

"You will lose no time? You will start at once?" eagerly muttered the old man, his eyes glittering, his thin cheeks flushing.

"Be sure I am to the full as anxious as you, my dear sir," laughed the lover, pressing Precious' hand under cover.

"It is what I have dreamed of for so many long years! It is what I had begun to call my *Gold Phantom*!" laughed Wingfold, nervously rubbing his hands. "No phantom now, but a glorious reality!"

"Let us hope so!" murmured Precious, her voice far from steady. "I at least will pray that it may come true—in time!"

"And I'll say *scat*!" bluntly interposed the physician, coming forward, feeling a little uneasy at the feverish brightness in his patient's eyes, and hectic color in his thin cheeks. "I'll

say get out! Sick man. Too much fuss. Want quiet. *Scat!*"

"I will see you again before I leave town, Mr. Wingfold," said Rex, as he turned away from the bedside, giving the maiden's hand a meaning pressure as he added: "May I have a few words with you, Precious?"

"Why not? No law against it. Lovers' rights. Get out!" the jolly doctor laughed, flinging up his stumpy arms and "shoo'ing" as though trying to frighten a whole flock of hens out of a flower garden.

Laughing, happier far than he had been at any time since the cloud first came over them, Rex led Precious out of the room, down-stairs and into the parlor. He started a little as the clock just then chimed the midnight hour.

"I had no idea it was so late!" he ejaculated. "And yet, enough has happened this night to fill a month of ordinary time!"

"I can hardly believe that it is not a wild, senseless dream!" murmured Precious, nestling still closer to his manly bosom. "It is all so strange—so highly improbable!"

"But this, darling," and Rex availed himself of one of the "lover's rights" spoken of by the fat little doctor. "And the promise made by your father! You will perform your part, little girl!"

"When you ask me," was the low response. "Whether you succeed or whether you fail, it will still be the same. I am yours, now and forever!"

And then Doctor Shipley would have been satisfied!

CHAPTER XII.

FIGHTING THE DEVIL WITH FIRE.

THERE was little rest for Rex Stuart that night, though he soon after took his departure from the house in which he had, so unexpectedly, won a glorious victory when all the chances seemed against him.

He had much to think of. He studied the chart, noting each crooked line, each dot, carefully comparing these with a mental map which the first sight of the paper had recalled from the past. And the longer he studied, the more sure he grew that he had actually passed over the very spot where, if this chart was to be believed, the Gold Phantom had for years mocked the efforts of the Wingfold brothers to re-discover it.

That alone did not trouble him greatly. He thought of Damon Wingfold and his desperate efforts to secure Humpy Dick. What for? A murderer, the hoary scoundrel called him. Because of the part he had played in the early portion of that evening? If so, how had the cunning rascal struck the trail so speedily?

"She couldn't have sent him word, though I'd lay long odds the demure little cat is acting under his or his son's orders! If she managed to overhear what was said about this chart!"

If Nettie Malcom really was serving the enemy, he knew there was trouble in store. She might easily have heard enough to put such a cunning rascal as Damon Wingfold on the right track, and then—

"They'll get more lead or steel than gold, if they monkey with me!" he muttered, setting his jaws firmly.

As a result of his steady thinking that night, Rex Stuart set about his preparations the next day with no little secrecy. Apparently his only deviation from the daily routine he had kept up for nearly two years, was his absence from his usual place in the bank when the front curtains rolled up and the doors opened for business.

Long before that hour, however, Stuart learned the sequel to the disturbance in which he had taken a prominent part the evening before.

Dark Durg, though shot at times innumerable, chased by scores of yelling, hooting, threatening footmen, had ridden away from them and lost himself to the hot-headed chase in a very few minutes. Men hurried for their horses, taking up the trail with loud vows to never abandon it nor turn back without having killed or captured the noted outlaw. That point was still in doubt, as many of the bold adventurers had as yet failed to return, though a number had done so, declaring that they had been able to discover neither fugitive nor his trail.

Without exposing his interest in the matter, Stuart found out that the descent on Maurice Wingfold's was a secret, at least to the public. This but strengthened his belief that Damon Wingfold was playing a desperate game for the "Gold Phantom." If not—if the attempted arrest was wholly an effort to vindicate the law—surely the bitter enemy of Maurice Wingfold would only too gladly catch at such a prime opportunity to cover his hated half-brother with shame and confusion? Even if the charge of aiding and sheltering a murderer could not be proven beyond a doubt, he would surely make the most of his chance, and cause the entire city to ring with his side of the matter.

But not a whisper could Rex Stuart catch. Apparently even the policemen had kept close tongues.

The young man made one discovery, however, and that was his being constantly shadowed. Vaguely, almost instinctively, he felt this, and

by patient playing, he soon learned that his suspicions were correct. If any doubt remained, it was dispelled by an incident that occurred about the middle of the forenoon.

He caught sight of Nettie Malcom just as she had passed by a store in which he was standing for a few moments, and there was something in her actions that recalled his suspicions of the past night.

Leaving the store, he followed her at a distance, and a few minutes later saw her meet Earl Wingfold, addressing him with poorly disguised eagerness, at the same time handing him a small parcel. Stuart was strongly tempted to make an effort to secure this package, even at the risk of bringing on a fight with the athletic "blood." He even started forward with this intention, when the very person whom he suspected of "shadowing" him, dashed past and fairly brushed against the young couple.

Beyond a doubt he uttered a warning, for both glanced toward Rex Stuart, then separated, each taking a course at right angles.

Stuart laughed grimly.

"All right, my hearties! I guess I'm just a little ahead on the deal, after all!"

He saw no more of his "shadow," but he relaxed none of his precautions, now that he knew the enemy were fairly in the game. The stakes were far too precious for him to throw away a single chance, and from that moment his resolve was taken.

He would match cunning against cunning. Since his enemies knew, as he now firmly believed, that he was on the track of the long lost cache of gold, he would play a double game, letting them see the one which would serve his own purpose the best. To do this perfectly, he required aid, and he scribbled a few words on a bit of paper held in the palm of his hand as he slowly walked along the street. This tiny note he left in the palm of a young man whom he met at the post-office, a keen glance being sufficient to put that friend on his guard.

Half an hour later, Rex Stuart entered a hotel, and nodding to the clerk, ran over the letters in the rack, opening one which bore his name. It simply contained a name and the number of a room. A minute later he was rapping at the door bearing that number, and as the barrier was opened, he quickly entered, a backward glance showing him that the corridor was then empty. If another shadow had been placed on his track, he had baffled him thus far.

"What's up, pard?" asked the man who admitted him in a low tone.

"I can depend on you for a few days, Lou?"

"For a week, month, year, all eternity, if you like, Rex," was the prompt response.

Louis Knapp was one friend out of a thousand. Rex Stuart had tried him time and again in the past, and never yet had he been found wanting. It was to him that Rex turned as by instinct, even before he decided it was necessary to play a double game for the surer defeat of his enemies.

Louis Knapp was but a recent addition to the population of Denver, though he and Rex had been "raised together" in the East, and his being comparatively unknown in the city would render him less liable to suspicion on the part of the enemy. And Rex hailed with delight what he had a few days before rather regretted; his friend was already making preparations for an extended expedition into the mountains, for the purpose of hunting, combined with a share of prospecting, though this last was but a "side issue," since the ground had been so thoroughly gone over that the chances of "making a strike" were hardly one in ten thousand.

Knowing how completely he could trust his friend, Rex told his story without reserve, only condensing it as much as possible. He spoke of the treasure he meant to unearth, of his enemies, of how much depended on his success.

"I am shadowed, beyond a doubt. If I were to set about fitting out for such a trip, no matter how cautiously I might move, those scoundrels would certainly smoke me. They would be on my heels the very hour I left town, and then I'd have to rub them out—if they didn't do the same thing for me in advance."

"I reckon we could get away with them," lightly responded Knapp.

"If we have to, we'll do our level best, of course; but I don't want a fight if we can manage without it. Afterward—when we've got the treasure safely home again—that's a different matter. I reckon the rascals will get a polite sufficiency!"

"You're running the machine. Tell me what I'm to do, and consider it done."

"I want you to hurry up your trip. Buy just what you expected to provide for that expedition. Let everybody know that you are going to the hills, hunting, and answer all questions just as you would have answered them had I said nothing to you on this point. Take the men you have engaged—of course they can be depended upon?"

"I believe so. You know them better than I do, though."

"Two of them, but you spoke of taking one or two more."

"That depends on you, mate. If you think a stronger force is necessary, or even advisable,

pick your men and I'll have them ready, if money is any inducement."

Rex Stuart pondered for a few moments, then said decidedly:

"George Little and Mark Oberlin are both good men. I don't mean to get into a row, if it can possibly be avoided. If we should—well, I fancy the four of us will be enough to hold our end level!"

"The four it is, then," was the ready response.

"It might attract attention were I to hire other men in such a hurry."

"You are right. That point is settled, then. You will get your traps together, to start at once. Leave town this evening, as early as possible. No one will think strange of that, for it is often done. The first camp always shows what has been forgotten, and the handier a market is then the better. But when once fairly out of town, push on at your best speed. Tell George to strike for our old camp, and he will know what to do. If I don't overtake you by that time, wait for me."

"You mean to leave town to-night?"

"If I can give my enemies the slip, yes. It will not be difficult, I imagine, after the trail I'll lay to-day. I'll speak for saddle and pack-horses, to be tested to-morrow. I'll engage provisions and tools, to be delivered at the same time. I'll speak to some men whom I have had dealings with before, and bid them set their figures for a two-weeks' trip into the hills, where hard riding and maybe some tough fighting must be taken into consideration. I know one fellow—good as they make 'em otherwise—who has a tongue that will spread the news all over town before sunset."

Already feeling confident of success, Stuart laughed heartily at the picture he thus drew, and Knapp joined him with a good will.

They quickly settled all minor points, and warning his young friend to act natural, to give no cause for suspicion, and to be sure and call at the bank for the avowed purpose of bidding his friend good-by, Stuart rose to take his departure.

"I'll be terribly disappointed if I don't find you at your desk, old man!" grinned Knapp. "I'll leave a last message. I was obliged to hurry up my trip, having to return home sooner than I anticipated."

"That will do no harm, and may serve a good purpose. Wait till I have got well clear of the house. Lounge about the office for a bit, until you are positive no one is shadowing you, then set down to work."

With a firm grip of the hand Rex Stuart took his departure. As he left the hotel he glanced keenly around him. He could see nothing to rouse his suspicions, but still he believed that the tools of Damon Wingfold were on his track.

To make sure that such was the case, for now he courted watching quite as much as he had a short time before shunned it, he hastened to the house occupied by Maurice Wingfold, and was admitted by Nettie Malcom, who blushed prettily as he lightly chuckled her under the chin—or was it at the words which accompanied the action?

"A fine-looking beau I saw you with this morning, little girl! But don't trust him too far, if you care to come out all right. He's a bad egg, if ever there was one, and hardly a marrying man, I should say!"

"I've heard different, sir," demurely retorted Nettie, but with a bit of the cat in her bright eye.

"Don't believe all you hear, my dear, or you may eventually find yourself over head and ears in trouble," nodded Rex as he entered the parlor, the door of which was just then opened by Precious herself.

It is not necessary to detail the conversation which passed between the lovers. Enough that Stuart, in a voice clear and rather louder than was absolutely necessary, told Precious that he intended to leave town on the following day, about noon, to hunt up the lost cache.

He believed Nettie Malcom was listening from some point of espial, and he dared not explain the actual truth just then. He meant to write a note to Precious, to account for his breaking his promise to call in the morning before starting on his expedition. And leaving her under this impression, he took his departure.

"It will throw them partly off their guard, and make it an easier task to slip away to-night, if that little cat carries or sends the news to headquarters," he mused as he strode rapidly through the street.

He at once set about laying his false trail, as hastily sketched for Louis Knapp. He made some false attempts to cover his movements, but only sufficient to give a natural coloring to his actions. He was very particular to declare to all with whom he had dealings, that he was simply going out of town on a hunting expedition.

At this consumed time, but Rex Stuart felt that he was being amply repaid for his trouble. He noticed a burly, bruised fellow in rude garb and slouched hat, questioning more than one of the parties of whom he had bespoken supplies or horses and mules, and later in the day he detected the same person—whom he now recognized as

Lop-eared Mose—in busy converse with the talkative fellow whom he mentioned to Louis Knapp as being his "advertiser."

Twice that day he met Earl Wingfold face to face, to pass him by without resenting that worthy's black looks and insolent scowls. At any other time he would have welcomed the chance to read the young "blood" a severe lesson, but now he had too much at stake to run any unnecessary risks. Time was precious, and he knew that Damon Wingfold had considerable influence among a certain portion of the city officials, and an arrest might be the consequence of a collision.

By noon his false trail was pretty well laid, and he believed that he had completely thrown the enemy off the right scent. Yet he did not even then cease his efforts to make assurance doubly sure. His future happiness largely depended on his perfect success in recovering the lost cache, and he was resolved to leave nothing undone that lay in his power.

But ere long he became convinced that trouble was brewing, of a sort which he had not suspected. And after another friend came to him with warnings to be on his guard, that Earl Wingfold was openly proclaiming his intention of horsewhipping him when and wherever he could be found.

It seems that at least one outsider saw Rex Stuart kick Damon Wingfold out of his half-brother's house, and had told the story to all who cared to listen. At any rate, the account was all over town, and Earl Wingfold caught at it as a good excuse to dispose of a dangerous rival.

With each warning, the never too cool temper of the young man waxed hotter and hotter, until at length he broke out savagely:

"When you hear that threat made again, say for me that I will be about town all this evening. That I do not care to bother with a whip, but that I will be ready, as I am able, to boot Earl Wingfold just as thoroughly as I did his father!"

Near the middle of the afternoon, Stuart learned that Louis Knapp had left town on his long-talked-of hunting expedition. He satisfied himself that this information was true, and by a series of cautious investigations, he found that no one in the employ of Damon Wingfold had either asked after or followed the party. Relieved on this point, he at once returned to his rooms to secure a short nap, of which he stood in need, particularly as he anticipated no rest until at least another night and day had passed over his head.

When he awoke, his brain was much cooler than it had been when he laid down, and as he took supper, he found cause to regret having sent that defiant message to Earl Wingfold.

"I caught the fellow making his brags, dear boy," eagerly uttered the man to whom he had delivered his defiance, "and at once clapped a stopper on his loose jaw. I delivered your message, and true as you sit there, the fellow flaunted the white feather in his face! All the same, I've heard since that he is looking for you—though he don't seem to care about hunting you where he knows you may be found!"

"Possibly because he thinks I might have friends by to see fair play," laughed Stuart, carelessly.

"Of course you'll down him?"

"If it's a choice between that and a horse-whip, maybe I'd better."

His friend laughed merrily at the remark, but appeared to take it for granted that Stuart would take care to bring the braggart to book, and skipped off to tell everybody whom he met what rare sport was in store for them that evening.

Rex soon saw that he could not hope to escape town without a row, if Earl Wingfold was really eager for one. His friends came to him in rapid succession, all with the same story to tell. He must take the young blood down, or Denver would soon grow a most uncomfortable place for him to live in. Even now, knowing how much depended on his speedy departure, on his having the full use of his limbs, to say nothing of his life, Rex Stuart would have postponed the encounter until his return, could he have given his friends the slip without too openly betraying his real object.

They stuck to him wherever he went, and when at length one of their number came hurrying up with the tidings that Earl Wingfold was, even then, going the rounds of the saloons and gaming-houses, openly avowing his purpose of flogging his enemy, there was nothing for it but to face the music. And now that he had fairly yielded to what was a most powerful temptation from the first, Rex entered on the counter-hunt with a grin, dangerous zest.

As it will so often happen, however, the two men who wished nothing better than to encounter each other, found considerable delay in getting together, more than once missing a meeting by but a few minutes.

Growing impatient at the swift passage of time, each minute of which was so precious now, Rex Stuart divided his little party and sent them off in different directions, with word to locate the enemy and report to him at a place he mentioned. Eager to witness the "fun," they

set off in high glee, while Stuart at once made for the rendezvous.

He had almost reached the place, when he caught sight of Earl Wingfold, accompanied by half a dozen others, just entering the saloon.

"His heelers with him, of course!" muttered Rex, stopping short and frowning blackly. "Ten to one I don't find a single friend inside!"

His mind worked swiftly. It would take time to collect his party, and during that time his enemy might pass on again. And his seeking to do so would be an acknowledgment that he feared to face the danger without friends at his back. That decided him, and he strode forward, entering the saloon.

The first person he saw was Earl Wingfold, leaning against the bar with a glass in his hand. Near him was Lop-eared Mose and a number of other hard-looking characters. And his swift, keen glance around the room showed him but one person on whom he could count for aid in case of being "double-banked." That was a well-known character in Denver and the mines, one of the "old residents," Jack Jones.

With a quick step Rex reached the bar and called for a glass of brandy. At the sound of his voice Earl Wingfold uttered an exclamation of surprise, starting back a little, one hand seeking a weapon.

Facing him, pale but cool, his blue eyes flashing dangerously, Rex Stuart lifted the glass to his lips and slowly sipped the liquor. For a moment Earl Wingfold seemed awed, confused, at a loss just what to do first; but then he laughed recklessly, calling the company up for refreshments, at the same time moving sideways, rudely jostling Stuart.

"Out of the way, you awkward scoundrel!" he hissed, turning and glaring at his rival. "You, is it, my gallant kicker of old and helpless gentlemen?" he added, as though for the first time recognizing Rex.

There was a closing up of his heelers, and Rex readily divined his plans. He was to provoke a blow or a retort, and then his crowd was to close in and make sure work of it. But his own blood was up, and he did not pause to count the odds against him.

"I kicked the second greatest rascal in Denver, for insulting a lady. I am ready to apologize by kicking the greatest and meanest, his hopeful son, Earl Wingfold!" sharply uttered Stuart, each word clear and cutting as a slap in the face.

And as if from just such a slap Earl Wingfold staggered back, his right hand clutching the butt of a revolver. But he had no time to draw, much less use it, for Stuart leaped forward, adding his weight to the straight, shoulder-shot, knocking his rival headlong through his gang of roughts.

"Down him, boys!" snarled Lop-eared Mose, viciously. "All at once!"

"Fair play, cuss ye all!" screamed Jack Jones, hurling a chair into their ranks, following it with his own body and fists, while Stuart at once made play the best he knew how.

The next moment the lights went out, and confusion reigned. Shots were fired, knives clashed together, and, fearing the police and arrest, Rex Stuart fought his way outside, turning the corner and running at full speed to the stable, where his good horse was ready for the road.

And almost before his enemies could realize the fact of his escape, he was riding swiftly out of Denver, now fairly on the trail of the GOLD PHANTOM!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOLD PHANTOM.

PALE, haggard-eyed, Rex Stuart stood on the point of rocks, gazing down into the valley lying at his feet. In one hand he held a worn and deep-creased paper, covered over with crooked lines and dots. For nearly an hour his eyes had roved from paper to valley, then back again, all the time his face growing harder and sharper the look in his eyes. But for the past few minutes he seemed turned into a statue of stone, so still and motionless did he remain.

"Well, pard, can you make it out?" cheerily called Louis Knapp, who was lying on the ground a short distance away, smoking his pipe. "Is it a true bill, or have you made a mistake in drawing up the indictment?"

Stuart started, like one abruptly awakened by a dream-voice. He brushed one hand across his brows, then turned toward the gay speaker, a faint smile flitting across his handsome face as he saw that earnest, sympathetic light in his friend's eyes. Louis was fond of light and trifling speech, but his wishes for the perfect success of their expedition were second only to those of Rex Stuart himself.

"We will know the whole truth before sunset, Lou," was the grave response, as his friend took a seat beside him on the ground, his blue eyes slowly passing over the worn chart for a final comparison with the map which was impressed on his mind. "I have made no mistake thus far. The valley lies below us, and is the identical one from which this chart was drawn. The creeks are there; the trees and the rock mounds are just the same, so far as I could make out from this point. The valley gives a double curve,

just as it is drawn on the map—in short, I could almost take oath that the man who drew up this chart, was sitting on that very point of rock, yonder!"

He nodded toward the spot where he himself had stood while surveying the pleasant prospect spread below and beyond him.

"Good for our side!" enthusiastically cried Knapp, flinging his hat high into the air, keeling over and catching it on the tip of his hunting-boot as it came down. "All that remains is to find where the Gold Phantom is hiding, unearth it, put it under close bonds for future good behavior, and guard it safely back to Denver! Poof! it's good as done, already!"

Rex Stuart smiled faintly, for he knew that Louis Knapp was talking more to drive the anxious cloud from his brow than any serious belief in what he uttered. During their long ride from Denver, and while watching together in the night, Rex Stuart had made a clean breast of it, telling his friend how much depended on the full success of his venture.

At first he had been so confident that all was to prosper with them. He knew that he could guide the little party direct to the valley from which he believed that chart had been drawn. He was positive he could walk straight up that valley and stamp his foot within a yard of the point indicated by the red cross marked on the map. And under that cross lay the long-lost cache, the fabulous GOLD PHANTOM at mention of which he had so often felt his lip curl with pitying scorn at the strange incredulity of man.

But as the distance lessened and they drew nearer to the valley, his mood changed. He grew graver and less confident. Doubts began to assail him. He asked himself much more frequently whether it was the part of wisdom to place so much reliance on the speech of one who acknowledged having been out of his brain for years. And now, though he could almost take oath the valley below them was the one from which that chart was drawn, his hopes of finding the buried gold were at the very lowest point.

There was so much at stake!

"A mere trifle, of course, Lou. I wish I had some of your spirits!" he muttered, with a foreboding sigh.

"Help yourself, pard," laughed Knapp, tossing a liquor flask across to the other, his dark eyes dancing. "Drink hearty, old fellow. And as my spirits go down, may your spirits go up, up, up! until they leave behind them forever these ugly mists of doubt and fogs of unbelief! Brace up and be somebody, Rex! Have some style about you, even if you haven't got a paper collar or a clean shirt to your back! Faint heart never won a red cent bucking against good luck, but a bold front is half the game and I've known it to knock science clean out of time before a second round! And that's the gospel of St. Louis, the Smart!"

Rex Stuart required something of the sort, and as he took a drink from the brandy-flask, his countenance began to brighten, quite as much from the idle chatter of his mercurial companion as from the generous liquor itself.

"All of which, being sifted down and interpreted, means—what?" he asked, more like his olden self as he returned the flask.

"That the sooner we get to work, the quicker we will be able to feast our longing eyes on the incomparable charms of this glorious Phantom of Gold!"

"If our clew really be worth anything!" muttered Stuart, his brow clouding and growing anxious again.

"Of course it is," positively. "Would we come this far on a wild-goose chase? Are we adorned with elevated fly-flappers on one end and a drooping ditto at the other? Have we thrown away a thousand chances at ge-larious game just for the comfort of getting here, only to get left now we are here? Not much, Mary Ann!"

"If ever the day comes when you have as much at stake as I have on this venture, Lou, you will be better able to understand my feelings now that a few hours must decide the cast."

"May a merciful Providence forever shoo Cupid out of my neighborhood, if this horrible change from a decent, companionable young fellow into a moping, whining, wet-blanket sort of perambulating ghost be the natural consequence of falling in love! Rex," and with a complete alteration of tone and manner, Knapp rose and passed one arm over the broad shoulders of his bosom-friend, "you understand me. I feel for you from the very bottom of my heart, and if I could insure your dearest hopes by so doing, I would thrust my right hand to the elbow into a roaring fire. You know this?"

Stuart grasped his hand with a vigor and earnestness that spoke even plainer than words. Louis smiled, then added:

"Just as you would do the same if it could benefit me—don't I know? Well—I play the fool, but it is for your own good that I do it. You are letting your doubts break down your strength and courage. So much depends on success, that you are making yourself believe that failure is inevitable. Instead—brace up and swear that you will come out top of the heap!"

You did when we were at the other end of the trail; why not now that the end is within sight?"

"It is different—"

"Get down to work and prove it different, then. Don't croak beforehand. Find the spot marked in your chart. Open it. And then, if we have to chew the cud of disappointment, we can do it justice. At least we won't be bothered with doubts as to whether or no we are not losing time that might be put to better advantage. Gospel, ditto of ditto!"

And talking after this fashion, Louis Knapp passed an arm through that of his friend, drawing him away to the point where their two comrades were patiently waiting them with the horses and pack-mules. And before this spot was gained, the lively tongue had roused Stuart from his fit of despondency, even if it had not restored the old bright smile to his handsome face.

Long before reaching this remote point in the hills, the full object of their mission had been explained to George Little and Mark Oberlin, and those worthies were to the full as eager as Louis Knapp himself to put the matter to the test, now that they were so near their journey's end. And little time was cut to waste.

Half an hour more found them removing the packs and equipage from the animals, staking the latter out where they could have fair picking. This duty was attended to by Little and Oberlin, while Louis Knapp bore Rex Stuart silent company as, chart in hand, the latter carefully sought to locate the exact spot where the golden treasure was supposed to lie.

"It is here, as near as I can tell," at length uttered the young man, stamping one heel deep into the comparatively soft soil.

"Or hereabouts, say," cheerfully added Knapp. "We won't be positive to a few feet, more or less. We have tools and strong arms. We can turn over an acre or two of ground just to give us an appetite for supper."

With folded arms Rex Stuart stared moodily at the ground. Now that the result was so nearly reached, he felt a strong reluctance to make any further move.

Through his brain flashed all the tales he had ever heard of this notorious "lost cache." He remembered how many times sanguine parties had set to work, only to be foiled by the treasure which then became known far and wide as THE PHANTOM OF GOLD.

Thousands firmly believed in its existence. Tens of thousands smiled whenever they heard it mentioned, evidently classing it with those other marvelous legends, The Lost Cities and The Mountain of Gold.

Until recently he had been one of the most skeptical. Only when he held that chart in his hand, listening to the dark tragedy of the past as dimly, partially outlined by the wounded cripple, and feeling that he had passed over the very ground marked out on that bit of paper, had his opinion changed. Then he believed quite as positively as he had at first disbelieved. But his hopes grew fainter and fainter the nearer he came to the end, until now, as he stood over the very spot indicated by that blood-red cross on the chart, he felt that it was all a lie, all a delusion, born of a disordered brain!

Not so Louis Knapp and his companions. They were eager to get to work, and without waiting for Rex Stuart to utter the word, they grasped their tools and began sending the dirt flying in a shower.

For a few inches the soil was loose and easy to manage, but then it grew harder and more compact, calling the pick into play. Yet Louis Knapp declared that he saw clear evidence that, at some remote date, the soil had been taken up and replaced.

"I wouldn't take ninety cents on the dollar and draw off without striking another blow!" he declared, seemingly in sober earnest.

Now that the ice was broken, Rex Stuart worked with the rest, his muscular arms and strong back coming into good play. And though an hour passed by without any discovery of moment—although they had excavated a pit waist deep for several yards around the spot where the young man had planted his heel, neither man flagged for an instant. Although they said nothing, each one was coming under the peculiar, indescribable influence of that burning fever which invariably attacks the seeker after gold.

Fatigue was unfelt. The passage of time was unnoted. The more ground they removed, the busier they labored, the more resolute they were to succeed before giving over.

And then—a deep, hoarse cry escaped the lips of George Little as his spade was driven into the side of the excavation, beyond where the pick had done its work. He started back, pointing out an object which every eye was upon, which every eye at once recognized—a small sack of skin, evidently made of untanned hide, since they could still make out the hair through its covering of mold and dirt.

"Hands off, lads!" cried Louis Knapp, sharply, himself drawing back. "We have done our work—the rest belongs to Stuart."

The three men left the pit, and Rex Stuart stood alone in its middle. He was staring fixedly at the bag, as though bound by a spell. It

looked real enough to other eyes, but to him—on that rude bag seemed written in fiery letters the words, "A GOLD PHANTOM!"

So long he stood motionless that Louis Knapp could no longer control his curiosity, and cried out encouragingly:

"For her, pard! Remember all that little bag represents! Freeze to it, Rex! There's a thousand more of them just beyond, begging you to pull them out into the sunlight. Go in, my lad!"

Mechanically Rex Stuart stepped forward and grasped the bag by its puckered-up neck, lifting it from its resting-place, holding it up before his glowing eyes—only to hurl it from him with a hard, metallic laugh!

The bag struck against a rock, the rotten stitches broke, letting a portion of its contents fall out.

A cry of angry astonishment broke from the lips of the three men as they stared, wild-eyed, at the bag.

Instead of gold it contained pebbles and sand! "I was not so far wrong, you see, Louis?" uttered Stuart, as he stepped out of the hole and advanced with a smile that was ghastly as the cold grin of death itself. "We have been chasing a Gold Phantom."

"Not all—it is only one bag that—"

Rex Stuart did not appear to hear his excited words, but brushed past him and sank down on a rock hard by, his head bowed upon his hands and his face hidden from view.

Louis Knapp followed him, at first fearing some rash act on his part. The blow was such a terrible one, even though Stuart had for the last few days evidently begun to fear they were doomed to meet with disappointment. If nothing at all had been discovered, the shock would have been far less hard to bear. But to find the chart true in every detail, even up to discovering the skin bag which seemed to have been buried there years and years before that day, so hard and perfectly settled was the soil around it—and then to find that instead of precious gold, its contents were pebbles and sand!

A less tasked brain than his might well totter on its throne for those first few minutes.

Rex Stuart looked up at that gentle touch on his shoulder, his face ghastly pale, his blue eyes shot with blood, but with a faint smile playing about his lips.

"Don't worry on my account, old fellow," he muttered, his voice husky and strained. "I'm all right. I looked for nothing better, but—I'll get over it quicker if you will let me have it out alone."

"You won't—you don't—"

"Mean to waste a bullet or soil a knife, Lou?" with a laugh that sounded a little more natural than the other. "I'll promise you that much. I'm not the stuff that gives up so easily!"

"And there's hope even yet!" eagerly added the other. "That may have been put in with the rest as a sort of stall! We'll soon find the real treasure, never fear."

"Not in this every-day world, old fellow. You know what it is—a Gold Phantom!"

The hard, reckless tone in which these words were uttered, did not serve to lessen the anxiety felt by Louis Knapp. More than ever he feared the result of this blow as concerning his friend. Yet he felt that he could trust him alone, after receiving that promise to do nothing rash, and surely the quickest method of curing him would be by unearthing the real treasure and pouring the yellow sands at his feet.

Naturally sanguine, Louis Knapp really believed he could do this. The bag stuffed with worthless pebbles puzzled him, but still he would not believe that a chart had been so carefully written out, true in all its minor details, true as to the lay of the ground, the curves of the valley even to dotting down each tree and prominent rock, simply for the purpose of perpetrating such a clumsy hoax as this!

"The real stuff is there, and I know it!" he muttered between his tightly clinched teeth.

"Ha! the boys have found it, sure!"

He sprang toward the pit, where he caught sight of Little and Oberlin briskly plying their picks, flinging out bag after bag, similar in outward appearance to the one which Rex Stuart had hurled from him, convinced by its lack of weight that his hopes were foiled.

And too impatient to wait for his trembling fingers to untie the hard knots, Louis Knapp drew his knife and slashed open the first sack he came to—only to grind his teeth with savage disappointment.

Pebbles and sand! Nothing more. One after another—still naught but worthless pebbles and sand!

With his form bowed, his face buried in his hands, Rex Stuart sat on that gray bowlder, thinking, thinking.

Not of himself. Of the far-away dear one who was counting the hours as they slowly dragged by, marking his progress in imagination, perhaps even at that moment smiling with joy as she pictured him with the long-talked-of Gold Phantom in his hands, a glorious reality!

It was of Precious Wingfold he was thinking, and of her bitter disappointment when he returned, as return he must, with empty hands,

powerless to save her father from his relentless enemies. How would she bear up under the heavy blow? Would she still prove true to the vows his eager ears had drank in so greedily? Or would she prove truer to what she held her duty than to her love? Would she sacrifice herself in order to preserve her father's? Would—

Thus his thoughts were running riot when he heard the voice of Louis Knapp ringing out, stern and menacing:

"Hold up, there! Stop and give an account of yourself!"

He lifted his head and caught sight of a tall, athletic figure advancing toward him. He saw Louis and his mates drawing their pistols and making threatening motions, but the stranger paid them no attention beyond a cold side glance.

That brought his profile into view, and Rex Stuart recognized the strange being who had given his name and title as Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.

With a sharp cry the young man rose to his feet, motioning his friends back with one hand as he sprang forward to meet the outlaw.

His face was as pale as death, his blue eyes glowing like balls of living fire, for a sudden suspicion assailed him at the sight of that person. And in harsh, menacing tones he spoke:

"I see it all, now! You came here before us and robbed the cache, you infernal scoundrel!"

Dark Durg paused with folded arms, a cold smile playing about his thin, compressed lips. More than ever did he look the Indian now, with his dress of mingled skins and coarse cloth, with his long, straight hair, black as midnight, with his bronzed skin and beardless face.

"If so, you surely must have noticed some signs of the ground having been recently disturbed," he said, with a sneer that sent the hot blood flashing into the cheeks of the young man.

"Who is this fellow, and what does he want, crowding in among gentlemen, Rex?" bluntly demanded Knapp, coming up, weapon in hand, followed by his mates, equally well armed and to the full as suspicious.

"One who has a better right to this valley than you, perhaps, my dear sir," retorted Dark Durg, turning on the hot-tempered youth with a cold smile. "I came here to speak with this gentleman. Will you be so kind as to take a back seat for a few moments? Then, if you insist upon it, I will try and satisfy you to the top of your bent."

Polite enough the words, but there was a cold insolence in the tone and look with which they were accompanied that set Knapp's blood to boiling, and only the prompt interference of Rex Stuart prevented a conflict then and there. He caught Louis by the arm, saying:

"Oblige me, mate, and step a little aside with our friends. I, too, wish to have a few words with this friend."

"Of course, if you ask it," muttered Knapp, though with a sorry grace, despite his words. "But all the same I'm going to keep an eye on the fellow, and if he makes a crooked move—well, I wouldn't give a counterfeit cent for his lease of life after!"

If Dark Durg heard this pointed threat, his face gave no sign. He still stood with folded arms, that cold, sneering smile playing about his thin lips. Nor did he offer to speak even when the three men had drawn back to the pit from whence they had torn the bogus treasure.

"Will you explain, sir?" sharply uttered Stuart, after a brief pause.

"What particular point, if I may ask?"

"You heard what that fellow—what Humpy Dick told me. You saw him give me this chart," taking it from his bosom and striking it angrily with his finger, his eyes flashing. "You heard him say that it would lead me to a rich treasure. And he said that if I needed any more information, you could supply it."

"You came, and you discovered?" smiled Dark Durg.

"That the treasure was a fraud! That instead of gold, there was nothing more valuable than pebbles and sand!" swiftly replied Stuart.

"And you accuse me of being beforehand with you? Of robbing the cache, and then adding insult to injury by refilling the bags with sand and bits of rock?"

Rex Stuart hesitated, his pale cheeks flushing a little under that keen gaze. Such had been his first thought when he caught sight of the outlaw approaching, but now he remembered what they had remarked upon before unearthing the first bag: that the earth was firmly packed, and evidently had not been disturbed below the surface for years.

"I thought so at first, but I begin to think I may have wronged you, as to that," he slowly replied.

"That makes ample amends for your charge, and we will drop that part of the matter, if you please," said Dark Durg, with a slight inclination of his head. "In return, I will be equally as open. I knew that you would find nothing worth the trouble of coming so far as—"

"What do you mean by that?" hoarsely interposed Rex, his eyes glowing anew, his hands clinching tightly.

"I knew that the story told you by Humpy Dick, poor fellow! was but a wild figment of a diseased brain, so far as his fabulous treasure was concerned. I knew that you would find only dross where you sought for gold. How well I knew, you can see for yourself!" and he laughed softly as he waved a hand toward the scattered bags of skin and their worse than useless contents.

Paler than ever Rex Stuart listened to this astounding admission, and it was with difficulty that he kept himself from leaping at the throat of the speaker or dashing his clinched fists into that face.

"You know all this? Yet you stood by and said never a word to correct the impression your friend was giving!"

"Because he was my friend," was the quick response, and the dark face grew grave, even kindly for a moment. "Because poor Dick religiously believed every word he then pronounced. Because any explanation on my part would have given him much pain. He was dying, as I then believed. Why should I make his last minutes of life so bitter?"

"You might have told me the truth while away from his side. When I was planning for the escape of your very dear friend," quickly uttered Stuart, something like a sneer in his voice as he pronounced the last words.

Dark Durg laughed shortly, the hard, strange look returning to his face, the red glow to his dark eyes.

"True, I might have done so, as you say."

"Then, why didn't you?" snapped Stuart, his anger growing hotter.

"Because I preferred to keep silence for the time being. Because it suited me better for you to come on this wild-goose chase, and discover the real facts yourself," was the calm response.

Rex Stuart stared at the outlaw of the mountains with actual amazement. Whatever excuse he looked for, nothing was further from his anticipations than this audacious admission. He did not know what to make of it. He was thoroughly puzzled, and at a loss what word to use in reply.

"I knew that the lust for gold would draw you to this spot," Dark Durg added, after a brief pause, during which he watched the bewildered young man with his sneering smile. "It has. I am delighted to meet you, as I hope to prove before you and I part company!"

There was something so peculiar in his looks and tones as he uttered these last words, that Rex Stuart involuntarily stepped back a pace, one hand dropping to a pistol butt. Dark Durg still stood with folded arms, smiling, sneeringly watching him with those keen eyes.

"Will you explain your meaning, sir?" sharply demanded Stuart. "If you are threatening me—"

"I am not threatening you, sir," was the cold retort. "I never threaten. If I have cause, I strike, and strike home! As for my reasons for acting as I have, if you will bear me company to yonder point of rocks," lifting one hand and indicating a high, shrub-crowned crag, almost directly opposite the point where we saw the gold-hunters, "you shall see them for yourself. What?" with a low, mocking laugh, as Stuart hesitated in his reply. "You are afraid to venture with me—"

"Afraid—of you?" sneered Rex, his eyes flashing. "Not if you were the foul fiend himself, instead of one of his servants!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DROOP-EARED DAISY SINGS TO ORDER.

This bold speech, albeit not the most complimentary, seemed to particularly please Dark Durg, judging from the swift and complete change that came over him.

"I am glad that you have so decided, Mr. Stuart," he said, with a grave earnestness that was far more agreeable than his former cold and even insulting sneers. "Nor will you regret the trouble I am putting you to."

"Lead the way as soon as you please, Dark Durg," coldly uttered the young man, adding with an emphasis that could not be misinterpreted: "I have been hoaxed once this day; I'd rather be in my shoes than in those of the man who tries to sell me again!"

A faint smile flashed across the dark face of the outlaw.

"Am I to look at that in the light of a threat aimed at me?"

"Call it a warning, if you like the term better."

"It is breath wasted, whatever it is called."

"So much the better for you."

Dark Durg flung out one bronzed hand with a gesture of contempt.

"If I meant you harm, would I come among your friends after this fashion? I have seen you ever since you struck these hills. At times I have been near enough to overhear your words, to touch you with a hand and never move out of my tracks. Yet you are alive and well. Does that look as though I meditated harm?"

"It proves one thing mighty plain," put in Louis Knapp who had drawn nearer as the two men confronted each other. "That you were full of luck not to be caught at your prowling tricks. Unless you are done with all such, bet-

ter put on a sheet-iron jacket, warranted shot-proof, for you'll need it, sure!"

Dark Durg turned a half-glance upon the blunt speaker, then spoke to Stuart, without any further recognition of his friend:

"If you are satisfied, come with me, Mr. Stuart."

"Make it a family party, Rex!"

"My business is with Mr. Stuart," sharply uttered Dark Durg.

"And my business is to see Mr. Stuart has as near fair play as three good men can insure; and where he goes, we go," was the prompt retort as Louis Knapp boldly faced the Ishmael of the Hills.

The latter turned to Rex, who was smiling faintly at the blunt earnestness of his comrade.

"It remains with you, sir, to decide. I am perfectly willing to show you why I have acted thus, but if you are afraid to take a few steps without a bodyguard—"

"Louis, you will wait here until I return or call for you," said Rex, turning to his friend, but who doggedly shook his head.

"I'm going with you, pard, whether or no. If he means all fair and above-board, why does he kick at such a proposition? He wouldn't, unless he had something to gain by toting you off alone where—"

Dark Durg flung out one hand impatiently, his tones hard and short.

"My last proposition, Mr. Stuart. Let your friends accompany us, since they are so suspicious, but let them keep out of earshot. Much of what I have to say is for your ear alone. If you accept, well and good. If not—so much the worse for you and those you love dearest on earth!"

He turned aside, as though to give the friends time and an opportunity for discussing the matter. And Louis promptly made the most of it. He did not like the looks of the Indian-like fellow, though neither he nor either of the hired men for the moment suspected the actual truth: that he was Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills, on whose head, dead or alive, rested a snug little fortune.

"He don't mean any good, Rex, or he wouldn't be so bent on separating us," he urged, earnestly. "It's an ugly black eye he carries in his head, and I don't like it! It says snake all over!"

Rex Stuart felt something of this same feeling, but the taunt Dark Durg had flung into his teeth still rankled, and he coldly replied:

"If I need help, pard, I can call for it. You will stay here and wait until I return."

"That's your say-so, Rex, and here's mine, straight as a string," doggedly returned Knapp, his face paling a little but his eyes glowing with a resolute light that told how firmly he had taken his position. "I'm going with you, whether you like it or not. I'll stop my ears with dirt or grass so I can't hear a word that fellow says, if you like it; but I'm going along! That's said and sworn to!"

Dark Durg turned toward them impatiently, saying:

"Give him his way. It makes little difference. If I mean you evil, a score of his caliber wouldn't make a particle of difference in the result. Are you coming?"

Past experience told Rex that nothing he might say would change Louis when once he had taken a stand, and without a word he followed Dark Durg, who was already striding across the crooked valley, heading for the high point of rocks, mention of which has been made.

Louis Knapp followed his friend, keeping a few paces in the rear, with a revolver drawn in his hand. Evidently neither he nor his two men placed any too great confidence in this bronzed stranger.

The rocky point was scaled, and Dark Durg paused at the lower edge of the fringe of shrubbery with which the height was covered.

"In a few moments you will be able to see my reasons for following the course I have taken, Mr. Stuart. All I ask of you and your men just now is to move cautiously, and not to show yourselves too plainly until you fully understand the situation."

Without pausing for a reply, he bent low enough to keep his head below the level of the cover, crossing over the narrow level, pausing near the further edge of the bushes, parting the foliage with his hands and peering forth. A moment thus, then he turned his head and nodded for Stuart to draw up by his side.

Rex complied, and so did Knapp, still gripping his pistol in readiness for instant use if such action should become necessary.

"Follow the direction of my finger—so!" muttered Dark Durg, pointing across a comparatively level tract, to a dark clump of trees and shrubbery near the foot of a rocky mass.

"There is a chap of some sort. I can make out animals—and at least one man!" muttered Stuart, not a little puzzled at first, though a moment later he gave a start and ejaculation as he turned and looked keenly into the bronzed face.

There was a peculiar smile upon the face of Dark Durg, and his eyes filled with a reddish light as he said:

"You begin to suspect the truth? If not,

I'll make open confession before you all. I did not tell you that poor Humpy Dick was laboring under a wild delusion, because I wanted to use you as a lure!"

"Speak plainer—I'm not sure I fully understand your meaning."

Dark Durg laughed softly, turning back and letting the leafy screen close behind him. He passed back along the trail they had made in forcing their way through the bushes, pausing when fairly clear.

"I knew that you would lose little time in acting on the information given you by Humpy Dick, when he made you his heir. I could have told you you were chasing a Gold Phantom, but I knew you would serve my ends best by making the trip."

"You said as much before," sternly retorted Stuart. "Who are those men over yonder? What connection have they with us?"

"Have patience, my dear sir. Follow me a little further, and you shall have all your doubts removed. Will you come?"

"I'll stick to you until you make all clear, or else provoke me into sending a bit of lead through your skull!" sternly retorted Rex.

Dark Durg laughed shortly, but made no reply. He moved at a good pace along the edge of the cover, passing away from the extreme point, then struck across the ridge when fairly beyond sight of the camp on the level two miles away.

The gold-hunters followed him in silence, but with their weapons handy for use. Louis Knapp and the two men were keenly on the lookout against an ambush, but Rex Stuart was thinking—thinking hard and fast! He could hardly believe that the suspicion which had leaped into his mind while gazing out upon that little camp, was true. They had taken so many precautions to break their trail. They must have gained such a long start, that it could hardly be possible. And yet—he felt that yonder camp was occupied by his worst enemies—that Earl Wingfold and his father followed after him, lusting for the long-lost treasure!

And before many more minutes passed by, this suspicion was confirmed, for when the ridge was crossed and the second valley gained, Dark Durg plunged into a dense thicket, to almost immediately reappear, dragging after him a bound and gagged prisoner.

At a single glance Rex Stuart recognized him. It was Mese Sawyer!

Half prepared though he was for something of the sort, Rex Stuart uttered a cry of surprise as he caught the sullen, angry glare of the desperado. Dark Durg turned toward him with a short laugh, saying:

"Do you begin to comprehend my meaning, Mr. Stuart?"

There was no reply. The young man stood staring at the ugly face of the desperado, but it was with eyes that saw nothing of the curious mixture of hope and despair, hate and speechless appeal. His brain was in a whirl, his thoughts confused.

"I will tell you, then," added Dark Durg, his tones growing hard and pitiless as he went on. "I let you believe Humpy Dick was telling the truth, as he himself religiously believed. I left you under the impression that you had but to come to yonder valley to place your hands on the gold for which many a life has already been sacrificed. Not that I had aught against you. To the contrary, I respected you and felt more grateful than you will be willing to believe, after this. You risked your life to defend a poor cripple. He was my friend—the one being in all this world who cared for or loved me!"

His voice grew softer, and as he uttered the last words he turned abruptly aside, a strange moisture in his jetty orbs.

"Gratitude?" sniffed Louis Knapp, with a short laugh of contempt. "I wonder it didn't strike in and puff you up like a hop-tad."

Dark Durg turned again, his face hard and stern as at first.

"I knew that this cur," touching the Droop-eared Daisy with one moccasined toe, "suspected Humpy Dick of holding a clew to the secrets. I more than suspected that he was in the employ of my bitter enemies. I knew, too, that other ears were listening to the story told by my friend, and that if you intended to pursue the Gold Phantom, you in turn would be pursued. And for that reason I permitted you to hug the vain and empty delusion to your bosom. For that reason I came on here in advance, not only to warn you of coming danger, but to receive my and your enemies as they deserved. Need I name them?"

Still Rex Stuart stood silent, seemingly spell-bound.

Dark Durg stooped and cut the thong that held the gag between the jaws of the Droop-eared Daisy. He squatted down beside him and with a drawn knife in his hand, its keen point pricking the skin of the desperado's throat, spoke sharply and sternly:

"Begin at the beginning, and give a full account of yourself."

"I'm chokin'—drink!" gasped the prisoner, his speech barely articulate.

Impulsively Louis Knapp advanced, stooped

and held a flask to his lips. Dark Durg frowned and made a motion as though he would push the hand away, but desisted as the young man muttered:

"I wouldn't do that. The poor devil is well-nigh suffocated. He's going to have a square drink, scowl as blackly as you may!"

"Down him, boss!" savagely grated Lop-eared Mose as Knapp removed the nearly emptied flask. "Down him, an' I'll be your dog from now on!"

Dark Durg laughed shortly as he glanced up into the face above him. Knapp drew back, something like disgust written upon his features. Mose Sawyer had not improved his condition any by that vicious cry.

"I've done my duty, as a white man. It's you and him for it now," coldly uttered Knapp, folding his arms.

"After me!" suddenly interposed Rex Stuart, breaking the spell which had held him motionless, his blue eyes beginning to glitter and glow as he moved close to the prisoner. "What brought you here? You followed me—who with and for what purpose?"

"Ef I make a clean breast of it, you'll turn me loose, boss?" whined Sawyer, catching at the slenderest hope.

"He has nothing to say in the matter," coldly interposed Dark Durg. "I took you prisoner. I will punish or reward you according to your merits. But you may serve yourself if you tell a straight story."

"What do you want to know fu'st?" sullenly asked the rough.

"Who did you come here with?" demanded Stuart, though he felt that he could give the answer to his own question.

"Old Wingfold an' his boy bossed the party."

Stuart turned away and sat down on a convenient boulder. He had learned all he cared to hear just then. The rest could be readily imagined. But apparently Dark Durg was more difficult to satisfy.

"You came here after this gentleman and his party? You knew what object they had in view? Answer straight, if you care for your life!"

Lop-eared Mose nodded his head in assent.

"Tell us how you learned so much. Your master, Damon Wingfold, had a spy employed in the house of his half-brother, I believe?"

"They was a gal—yes," growled Sawyer, reluctantly.

He saw that his captor knew too much for him to attempt any false story, without running great risk of being caught lying.

"Go on and tell the rest. How you found out about the clew to the treasure. From beginning to end. And bear my warning in mind. If I catch you in a lie, I'll cut your tongue out that same moment!"

There was something in those glowing eyes that warned the Droop-eared Daisy to be on his guard. He felt that his life depended on the result, and all thoughts of evasion vanished that instant.

He told how he had known Sterling Coin in the days gone by, and how curiously he had discovered his one-time partner in the terribly deformed Humpy Dick. He gave his real reasons for attacking the hunchback, keeping nothing concealed. And thus, for the first time, Rex Stuart learned the whole story of that eventful night in Denver.

He exposed the attempted arrest of Humpy Dick, even giving the name of the accommodating judge who had afterward suppressed all mention of the affair, securing and destroying the warrants, cautioning the policemen to keep the matter close-locked in their own bosoms.

He told how Nettie Malcom, paid by the gold of Damon Wingfold, and rendered still more eager in her espial by the love-making of Earl Wingfold, managed to overhear and see enough on that night to give the bold plotters all the hints and clews they otherwise lacked. She had even overheard the greater part of the story told by Humpy Dick before his strength began to fail him, though she could not satisfactorily explain how it was that Dark Durg managed to escape from the house with his wounded friend.

Dark Durg laughed softly as he listened, and a faint smile came into the face of Rex Stuart as his memory reverted to the heroic struggle Doctor Shipley had that night with "the cat."

"The most o' this the gal writ out that night, an' next mornin'. She hunted up the boy, an' give him the note, as you see'd, boss," turning his bloodshot eyes toward Rex Stuart. "I was watchin' of ye then, an' fearin' you'd l'arn too much, I run ahead an' give 'em the office. They broke away, but I see I'd give myself away, clean!"

"That didn't make so much difference, though, sence I'd got two good shadows at han', an' you hedn't gone twenty rod afore one o' them was on your track. They done thar work as well as mortal men could, an' we thought we hed you dead to rights. The gal swore you hedn't left the paper at her house, so we knowed you must hev it on your pusson. An' so we made up our minds to lay you out that night, an' take the dockymint fer pay."

"The old man, to give the job a healthy color, takes an' sets a story goin' as how you'd kicked him shameful. It was pritty nigh the truth,

too, though I ain't sayin' he didn't deserve all he got—durn him fer gittin' me into sech a pizen nasty scrape as this!" savagely growled the rough, in an undertone.

"Stick to the text, Moses," coldly warned Dark Durg.

"The boy was to let it be knowed that he was on the hunt fer you, with a hosswhip to balance your boot. He wasn't to take no long resks, though I wou'd call him a coward. It was the boss that laid out the plan, an' the lad hed to stick cluss to it. A lot o' us boys was to keep him in sight, an' when he bounced you, boss, we was to close in an' lay you out, strip your karkiss an' levant fer dark kiver."

"It looked like a dead-open-an'-shot when you come in on us all by your lonesome self, that night! But we slipped up on it—bad! You got away in the dark—that was my part, to take keer o' the lights, while the boys downed you. I done what I was told to, but somehow you give the boys the slip, an' got away."

"That wasn't the wust, though! We couldn't find you that night, nor yit the next day, though I reckon we hunted the hull town over so cluss that a mouse couldn't 'a' got away ef we'd bin lookin' fer that! An' it was plum' dark ag'in afore we give it up that you'd give us the slip an' struck off fer the lost cache!"

"The boss ciphered it out. He knowed you was a frind to young Knapp. He found whar he had registered and took a room at the hotel whar you hung out. Then he found out that he'd set off fer the hills the day afore, an' the rest come easy enough."

"Afore midnight we was ridin' away from Denver, puttin' in our best licks. We stuck to the trail fer a day, but couldn't git word o' no sech outfit, an' then we give over tryin' fer your trail. I was pritty well knowin' to the lay o' the ground, an' undertuck to bring the boss nigh about the place we thought most likely fer to strike ye, or, anyway, some signs to tell us which was the right road to foller."

"Late last night we went into camp over yender a bit, an' this mornin' I sot out fer a look through the hills—wuss luck!"

With a savage snarl, a covert but deadly glare at his captor, Lop-eared Mose concluded his recital.

"Where you met a warmer reception than you anticipated—precisely," interposed Dark Durg, bending forward and picking up the gag to knot a fresh thong in place.

"I've told everythin' I know, an' I'll take oath it's the clean article, boss," uneasily muttered the Droop-eared Daisy, licking his dry lips with his tongue. "Turn me loose, like a white man! I'll make a straight shoot fer town, an' you won't never be bothered with the likes o' me ag'in!"

"I don't intend to," coolly replied Dark Durg, the gag in one hand and the point of his knife touching the hairy throat as he spoke. "Open your jaws for a moment, please!"

"Don't let him, boss!" muttered the wretch, through his tight-clinched teeth, turning an appealing glance toward Rex Stuart.

"He has nothing to say in the matter. You are my captive. You are to live or die, just as I decide," was the cold response, as the point of the knife bit through the skin of his throat. "Will you open your mouth, or shall I make a slit large enough in your throat?"

"I'll ha'n't ye—" Deeper sunk the knife, and seeing naught but cold, merciless decision in those gleaming black eyes, Mose Sawyer yielded in despair.

Louis Knapp shivered with disgust as he turned to Rex Stuart.

"Let's get out of this, pard! It's turning my stomach, bad!"

Without a word the young man rose and the four gold-hunters moved away from the spot, passing over much the same trail by which they had reached the valley. Not a word passed between them. They had plenty of food for thought, not alone in the confession the Droop-eared Daisy had made, but in the words uttered by Dark Durg.

The lost cache was indeed a Gold Phantom! And then—to be so utterly deluded! To be used as a lure to draw others into the net of this Dark Durg!

As they regained the hight, Louis Knapp attempted to utter some consolation, but his friend turned from him with a little shiver.

"Leave me by myself for a few minutes, pard," he muttered, sinking down on a rock that grew near the edge of a deep, narrow chasm in the rocky earth. "No," he added, with a smile, as he caught Louis glancing from this abyss back to his face. "You needn't think that. I've all the more reason for living now. Precious will need a living friend, far more than a dead one!"

Louis Knapp saw truth in his eyes, and drew apart with his mates, leaving Rex Stuart there alone. Not for long did he remain thus, however, for the light echo of footsteps aroused him from his gloomy reverie, and he glanced up to behold Dark Durg close beside him.

A vivid flash came into his eyes and he said sharply:

"Will you never take a hint? If you are wise, you will keep out of my path. My eyes

are open, now, and I'm in an ugly mood. Go away!"

"When I have fully explained my conduct, Mr. Stuart," was the reply, grave and earnest. "If I have suffered you to deceive yourself, it was because I saw no other means of gaining my ends, without running too great risks. I have all but gained them now. I have Damon Wingfold and the only living person whom he loves and would shed a tear for, safe within my grasp. You lured them hither, and I thank you for it."

"Unwittingly on my part, I assure you!" with a low laugh.

"But none the less surely," was the quick response. "In doing this, your part is played to the end. Go back to your city and give over your worse than vain hope of ever securing the Gold Phantom—for *phantom it is* and ever will be to you and yours!"

Rex Stuart rose to his feet, but his eyes were downcast and he spoke no word in reply. Dark Durg was silent for a brief space, but when he spoke again his voice was softer, kinder, almost gentle.

"You know that your hopes are all in vain, so far as the gold is concerned, but still your trip has not been without its good result. You can return home, knowing that Damon Wingfold nor his son will ever trouble your friends. They came to slay—they will be slain!"

Savagely came the last words, and Rex Stuart looked up quickly.

"Why do you hate them so bitterly? What have they done to you?"

"Made me what I am, an outlaw and an outcast—an Ishmael of the Hills, my hand against all mankind, even as their hand is against me."

"Then—Humpy Dick at first called you the Indian Avenger, or something like that! Was it your story he was telling?"

"Whether yes or whether no, it matters not to you, young man. Go back to Denver and make your love happy. She deserves it. She is as near being an angel of light as mortal flesh ever becomes. Treat her kindly, and never leave her to go wandering off after gold—never do that, unless you wish to tempt fate as—"

Dark Durg paused abruptly, turning his face aside.

Rex Stuart stood in silence for a brief space, his brows contracting, his eyes filling with a dogged light that partly betrayed the subject of his thoughts. Why was this man so anxious for him to hasten away? Could it be that the Gold Phantom was a reality, after all? That he, Dark Durg, possessed the secret? If so—

"Go back to Denver, young man, and forget these wild dreams of sudden wealth, if you hope to escape shipwreck as many another poor devil has suffered. Be content to make your living slowly and surely. Marry that girl, and she will make your home blessed. Tell her I send her my blessing, if she will accept it. Tell her father—tell him that if I cannot forget, I will try to forgive, if only for the sake of his pure and gentle daughter. Will you tell him this?"

"What have you to forgive?" slowly asked Stuart, though the moment the words escaped his lips the answer flashed across his mind.

"Murder!" sharply uttered Dark Durg.

"Then you are the—"

"Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills!" was the interposition. "Let that knowledge suffice. It can do you no good to learn more. Once back in the city, try and forget all that has passed here, and—"

"I am not going back—at least not for some little time."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I've not yet abandoned hope of capturing your Gold Phantom! That I am going to hunt for it until I see better reasons—"

With a harsh, snarling cry Dark Durg grasped him around the body and held him suspended over the yawning abyss, helpless as an infant!

CHAPTER XV.

HOW DARK DURG PLAYED THE HOST.

HELPLESS as an infant in the grasp of a giant, his arms pinned to his sides, unable alike to strike a blow or draw a weapon, Rex Stuart hovered over the deep chasm, down which meant death after awful maiming and mutilation!

For a score of seconds thus, then, with a short, hard laugh Dark Durg stepped back, turned around and lowered his captive to the level. He folded his arms across his chest, seemingly untouched in wind or muscle by that almost marvelous exhibition of strength and nerve.

For an instant Rex Stuart staggered, his brain turning dizzy from the sudden revulsion even more than from the glimpse he had obtained of that frightful depth when he felt that only a few moments stood between himself and eternity. Then, with a low, gasping cry of mad rage, he tore a revolver from his belt and thrust the muzzle almost against the broad bosom of the Ishmaelite.

"Shoot, if you are a coward!"

Cold, scornful came the words. Dark Durg made no motion to either knock aside the menacing muzzle nor to draw a weapon of his own. He did not even unfold his arms, though a single movement of either would be suffi-

cient to dash aside the pistol, perhaps before it could be discharged. Instead, he trusted his life to those cold, biting words.

And not without good judgment, it appeared. A flush came into the face of the young man, and instead of pressing the trigger he hesitated.

"Shoot, if you see a single nerve tremble or twitch, young man," coldly added the outlaw of the mountains. "Bah! do you think I value life so highly? If I have fought hard for it, heretofore, it was more because I would not give my enemies a chance to triumph over me. Death at the hand of an honest man is more like a boon than a terror!"

Whether so intended or not, these words caused Rex Stuart to lower and then replace his weapon. He stepped back a pace or two to guard against being caught off his guard a second time, muttering:

"It would serve you more than right to blow you through, but I can't do it without you try to defend yourself!"

"You defied me, and I simply showed you how helpless you were if I chose to use force instead of argument, Mr. Stuart," calmly returned Dark Durg. "That you are still drawing the breath of life, thank the fair young woman whose life is bound up in yours. It was her face rising up between me and you that held my hand. She was kind to him. She took him home and when the wolves came howling at our heels, she aided him to escape. She loves you—I could read the truth in your eyes—and that has stood you in good stead this day!"

Still confused, his brain anything but clear, Rex Stuart muttered:

"You mean Humpy Dick? He lied to us! He swore that the story he told was gospel truth! He lied to us, and I'm going to get even if it takes a leg."

The rapid fall of footsteps startled them both, and they turned to see Louis Knapp and his two men hastily advancing, weapons in hand, their eyes glowing, their faces betraying strong excitement.

"Eyes open, pard!" cried Knapp, sharply, his pistol rising until it covered the Ishmaelite. "Mark swears this fellow is Dark Durg!"

"Ef it ain't, I'll eat my hat, boss!" promptly echoed Oberlin, his thin, dark face strongly agitated, his jetty eyes gleaming vividly.

"And you are bloodhounds hungry for the gold set upon my head?" laughed the outlaw, his voice sharp and filled with bitter scorn. "I would rather be Dark Durg, a thousand times over!"

"You don't deny it, then?" demanded Knapp, sharply.

"Why should I? I am proud of it. Yes, I am Dark Durg. There is a heavy price on my head, and the rewards are payable on its production, whether the body bears it company or not. Shall I offer you my knife to complete the job, blood-sucker?"

Louis Knapp flushed hotly at the sneer, and his gaze turned to Rex Stuart, who was staring from one to another, his face that of one just rousing from a dream or a waking reverie.

"What are you kicking up a row for, pard?" he demanded.

"This fellow is the notorious outlaw, Dark Durg, who—"

"What of it? We're not policemen, are we?"

Louis Knapp stared at the speaker with such ludicrous amazement in every feature that Rex Stuart could not keep from laughing aloud. Then, as though fearing for the feelings of his friend, he stepped forward and touched the other on his arm, his voice natural, the clouds apparently fairly driven away from his brain.

"We're not angels of grace nor models of propriety, Lou, old pard, but I think we're too good to lay a poor devil by the heels and drag him off to adorn a hangman's noose. Am I not right?"

"Then you know him, all along?"

"And before, pard," laughed the other, more like himself than he had been since that chase of the Gold Phantom first began. "You remember the stranger who carried off Humpy Dick?"

"That was Dark Durg?" ejaculated Knapp.

"That was Dark Durg," nodded Stuart, with a smile at the expression of intense disgust that swept over the countenance of his blunt mate.

"You knew him then. You knew there was a price on his head, that he was accused of a score of murders, each—"

"Say killings, and I'll let it pass: murders, and I fling the lie back in your teeth, young man!" sharply interposed Dark Durg.

Louis Knapp waved his hand impatiently, not deigning a glance in that direction, still intent on summing up the case in hand.

"You knew that he had committed crimes enough to hang him a dozen times over, if he had that many necks for the rope. And yet you did all you knew how to get him free with his mate. You covered his flight, and gained time sufficient for him to win free. And then—he pays you after this fashion! Robs you of your rights, and uses you as a decoy duck, to laugh at when his ends are gained! He does all this, and still you stand up for him when a fellow wants to take him back to pay justice its honest dues! Good Lord! It makes me sick!"

"Those laugh best who laugh last, pard," smiled Stuart, his blue eyes glowing. "The

game is not yet played out, and you can't pick the winner until the last card falls face up. I'm not satisfied that the lost cache may not yet be found, and as the first move—Dark Durg, where can I find your particular friend, Humpy Dick?"

He turned upon the Ishmael of the Hills, speaking with an abruptness which he hoped would effect its purpose. But Dark Durg gave no sign of confusion or annoyance, replying coldly:

"It can do you no good to find Humpy Dick."

"That is for time to tell. If you refuse to tell, we will keep our eyes on you night and day, until you are forced to show us the way to your wounded friend. That he has lived so long, is little short of a miracle. That he can live long without care and attendance, is still less likely. When you go to him, we will go too."

Dark Durg smiled coldly at this rapid summing up.

"Hardly, without my free will. I have no serious objections to your seeing my friend, only I know it can do you no earthly good."

"I can learn from his lips where the treasure is!"

The Ishmaelite flung out one hand impatiently, saying:

"He can tell you no more than he told you that night in Denver. For many years his brain has been under a cloud, and though he is perfectly sane now, he knows nothing about that lost cache. To him, as to you and all the rest of mankind, it is in reality a Gold Phantom—a Gold Phantom it must remain to the end of time!"

"The story was founded on fact. I know that from what I have heard others tell. If so—if there *was* a treasure—it must still exist. I have a claim upon it, and while there is the ghost of a hope, I'll never give over the search."

"It will be time spent in vain—and worse!" with a sudden glow in his dark eyes, his face growing hard, his voice filling with a savage intensity. "That gold is accursed! It has been drenched with human blood, and it will cost still other lives before a grain of it comes to the light of day!"

"I am willing to run the risk," gravely uttered Stuart. "I came here to find the long lost cache. I will not turn my back while even a shade of hope remains. There is a hope—Humpy Dick! Once more, Dark Durg, I ask you to show me your friend."

The Ishmael of the Hills turned his back, his head bowed, his face grim and moody. For a brief space Rex Stuart waited for an answer, then he spoke again:

"You said you wished me to bear your thanks to one back in Denver. In her name I ask you for an interview with Humpy Dick!"

"It can do no earthly good," was the dogged reply. "He can tell you nothing more than you already know. He would bid you go to yonder valley and unearth the treasure. What that marvelous treasure is, you have seen! Yet it was very real to the poor, crazy fellow when he buried it so carefully! And it is none the less real to him now. Then why endanger his life by needlessly telling him the truth?"

"To make sure it is the truth," bluntly interposed Knapp.

Dark Durg flashed an ugly glance upon him, saying sharply:

"This is a matter between your better and myself. If you were all, I'd end the matter with a bullet through your hollow pate!"

"Consider me the sum total, and pitch in, beauty!" laughed Louis, a hand on pistol, ready for work if his blunt challenge should be accepted; but Rex Stuart interposed.

"Don't interfere, Lou. You are only making matters worse. And you, Dark Durg, can take your choice: Show me to Humpy Dick, or we will dog your every movement until we track you to his hiding-place."

"Once more, I say it can come to no good!"

"You may be right, but there is too much at stake for me to neglect a single chance, no matter how slender it may be. More than life depends on my unearthing this lost treasure, and if I fail, it must be with a clear conscience."

Once more Dark Durg averted his face, rolling a round pebble under one moccasined foot, seemingly deep buried in thought. The others waited and watched him in silence. Rex Stuart was pale but resolute. He had taken his stand, and nothing could shake his determination. With or without the permission of this man, he would see and talk with Humpy Dick, to learn the actual truth concerning the treasure.

Dark Durg turned abruptly, his face hard-set and stern, his voice clear and distinct, his black eyes gleaming brightly.

"If I agree to take you to my friend, and permit you free converse with him, will you agree to waste no more time in these parts?"

"Time is fully as precious to me as it can be to you, sir," was the quick reply. "If Humpy Dick can convince me that the treasure is indeed nothing more than a phantom, I will abandon the search."

"Provided we have the first talk with the fellow," hastily amended Louis Knapp, suspecting double play on the part of the outlaw.

Dark Durg gave him no notice, speaking to Stuart alone.

"You will make no effort to see or warn that party over yonder?"

Rex Stuart laughed shortly.

"Is it likely? Their first greeting would be a bullet through my heart or brain!"

"They belong to me, and I will claim my own though I have to kill you and every one of your men!"

"They came here with their eyes open, and of their own accord. So far as I am concerned, they must fight their own battles."

"Then follow me," said Dark Durg, turning and striding rapidly away. "You shall see Humpy Dick and learn from him what your own eyes should have told you. I only ask that you spare him as much as you can. Poor fellow! the Gold Phantom is terribly real to him, even yet!"

"Look out for snags, pard!" whispered Knapp, as they followed the lead of the outlaw. "There's an ugly devil in those eyes of his, and he may try to get even with some infernal trick!"

Rex Stuart nodded, but he was little disturbed by any such fear. He remembered how soft the outlaw's voice had grown while speaking of Precious Wingfold, and he felt that she was his safeguard.

For nearly two miles Dark Durg led the way through the hills, without speaking a word, or casting a glance over his shoulder to see that his self-invited guests were keeping pace with him. At the end of that period, however, he paused abruptly, turning and saying:

"We are nearly at our journey's end. I am placing more trust in you than I ever expected to show a fellow-being again, after the bitter black experience of the past! I am going to take you into my den, where I have spent years—ever since the day when I was hunted out of Denver like a mad wolf, simply because I dared to face an enemy, and demanded at least the shadow of reparation from him!"

"If it will make your mind any easier, Dark Durg," gravely replied Stuart, "I will pledge you my word of honor, for both my mates and myself, to keep the secret of your hiding-place sacred. On no consideration will I make it known."

"Unless you try to come the double over us," amended Knapp.

Dark Durg turned to him, with a cold smile.

"If I were as suspicious of evil as you seem to be, young man, I would hardly permit you to enter my den."

"Prove my suspicions wrong, and no man on earth will be quicker to own up wrong," retorted Louis, with a grim smile.

"I'll hold you to your bargain," nodding with a low laugh. "After all, I can't blame you so much. Give a dog a bad name—but this is not what I wanted to say," turning again to Stuart. "Humpy Dick is far from well, though he has picked up remarkably fast, considering how low he was when I had to take him on that wild night ride!"

"I believed him dying, even before we left the room to see what that alarm at the door meant."

"And so did I. I was not sure life lingered in his body, when I bore him to my horse. But I would not leave even his poor, deformed carcass there for that devil to gloat over! I bore him here, by slow stages, after getting clear of the town. I nursed him the best I knew how, and was rewarded by seeing his strength gradually return. Still, as I said, he is lying very low, and poorly able to withstand much excitement."

"I will be as careful as possible, never fear."

"I believe you will, when I tell you that scarcely an hour passes over his head, but poor Humpy Dick speaks of that young lady—the sweet angel, he calls her—and never without coupling her name with a prayer. By your love for her, I charge you to guard against exciting him unnecessarily."

"You shall be the judge. If I permit my anxiety to carry me on too fast, give me a hint, and I will remember your warning," earnestly replied Stuart, touched by the mention of Precious Wingfold.

Dark Durg shook his head, with a half-smile as he glanced toward the keen, watchful eyes of Louis Knapp.

"I must trust to your own discretion. One visitor will be all poor Dick can withstand so early, and I suppose this gentleman," bowing to Knapp, "will feel more at ease if he can have my company while that interview lasts."

"You ought to feel complimented by my intense interest in your movements, Mr. Durg," bowed Louis, gravely, but with a twinkle in his eyes that said far more than his tongue.

"Let the future show how thoroughly I appreciate it, sir," with a light laugh, then abruptly growing serious again: "I will leave you to talk with Dick. Take your time, and remember that he is a very sick man, poorly able to withstand excitement. Follow me, and step lightly."

A few rods further brought them to a steep trail which wound up and partly around a high rock wall, ending in a narrow ledge which was hidden from observation of any one standing in the valley below, by the little clump of bushes growing upon it.

Passing behind this leafy screen, Dark Durg revealed a low, irregular opening, into which he entered, closely followed by Rex Stuart and his companions.

"Stand still for a moment, while I strike a light," softly uttered the outlaw, but low though his tones were, they attracted attention.

"Is that you, old friend," came a low, weak voice from some little distance beyond.

"Yes, Dick," was the quick response, as the faint glow of a match dimly revealed the tall figure of the outlaw. "I have brought you a visitor from town, who can tell you of the lady who treated you so kindly that night. Be patient one moment, old fellow!"

There was a low, eager cry, but though the cave was now dimly visible by the rays of a candle, nothing could be seen of the author.

Dark Durg lit a second taper, leaving the first standing on a rude table of hewn timber, holding the other in his hand as he spoke:

"I will show you to Dick, Mr. Stuart. Your friends can bear us company to the turn, if they choose, provided they are willing to come back with me when their curiosity is fully satisfied."

"They will, of course," muttered Rex, not a little agitated now that he knew a few minutes would in all probability settle forever the question of the Gold Phantom.

Louis Knapp was using his eyes to the best advantage, looking keenly for any suspicious object or movement; but wholly without success.

The chamber in which they stood was low, irregular, anything but romantic or comfortable. A few skins and hides lay on the rough, uneven floor, others hung on the walls, together with a few Indian weapons. The rude table and two rough stools comprised all the furniture, except a small, rusty sheet-iron stove, evidently a relic of prospecting days.

Dark Durg led the way around a sharp turn, through a narrow passage which ran along for several rods, then enlarged into a chamber of nearly the same size as the outer one. There was even less of comfort in this den, except that the pallet on which a crooked, twisted figure lay, was composed of finer, softer skins.

Very much like a ghost Humpy Dick looked by the feeble light of the candle. His face was so thin, the yellow skin clinging tightly to the bones, his eyes so wild, looking larger than ever from his extreme emaciation.

"This is Mr. Stuart, Dick," gently uttered Dark Durg, as he placed the candle on a rocky ledge above the pallet. "He will tell you about the good young lady, who helped him save you from your enemies that night in Denver. And you will answer his questions the best you can, I hope. If you feel faint—if you want anything that I can get or do for you, shake the can and I'll come."

He turned away, gazing inquiringly into the face of Louis Knapp. That gentleman answered the mute question by turning on his heel and striding back to the first chamber, followed by the others, leaving Rex Stuart alone with Humpy Dick.

"The lady? Is she well?" eagerly muttered the deformed.

Rex Stuart squatted beside the pallet, talking low and earnestly. He was strangely moved by the deep interest which this hapless being evidently felt in his loved one, and hoping to the more surely gain his ends, he dwelt on her gentleness, her true heart, her sympathy for Humpy Dick. And then, by degrees, he passed on to her sore trials, telling how mercilessly Damon Wingfold was persecuting her through her father, and how nothing but the speedy possession of a large sum of money could save her from lifelong misery.

Little by little his own heart rose and grew lighter as he saw how intensely Humpy Dick was interested, only to fall by degrees as the deformed spoke eagerly of his buried treasure, telling him to lose no time in unearthing it, to place in her hands as part thanks for her great kindness to a hunted, miserable wretch!

For the spot he described was the same which had proved worse than barren—the treasure he gave so generously was worse than dross!

In his disappointment, Rex Stuart said as much, and even in his own strong agitation, he felt a thrill of pity for Humpy Dick, who seemed fairly stupefied by the sudden revelation. He panted and moaned faintly, repeating over and over again the words he had spoken before. He could not believe—or was it but a part of the cunning game begun by Dark Durg? Was this but a continuation of that devilish scheme to draw the Wingfolds into a snare?

He squatted there beside the deformed, hearing naught of his idle maunderings, trying to clear his own brain, now so sadly confused by the utter destruction of his last faint hope. Steadily his anger toward the Ishmaelite of the Hills grew stronger, until it broke forth in a deep, grating curse.

"Dark Durg must know! I'll tear the secret from his lips, if I have to tear his tongue out with it! I'll—"

He was rising to his feet when a heavy weight fell upon his back, crushing him to the rock floor. Deadly hands closed about his throat, growing tighter and tighter until a million stars

flicked across his fading vision, until that hoarse, vicious snarling died away, and—

When sight and senses returned, Rex Stuart found himself being dragged into the outer chamber. He tried to cry aloud for help, but a cold, merciless laugh answered him, and a shiver crept over his frame as he saw Louis Knapp and his mates lying on the floor, motionless!

"Dead! murdered!" he gasped, faintly, his brain reeling.

"Ay! dead enough!" harshly laughed Dark Durg, kneeling on his chest. "Hold your-elf lucky if your end comes as sudden and painless!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A REMARKABLE COINCIDENCE.

"SATAN grill that fellow for supper! why don't he show himself?"

For the hundredth time since the sun crossed the meridian and marked the change of day, Damon Wingfold gave an angry snarl as he cast a fruitless glance around in quest of Lop-eared Mose.

Though the Droop-eared Daisy had sung his little song under compulsion, he had stuck remarkably close to the truth, and there is little necessary to be added to that explanation as to how and why the party under command of Damon Wingfold came to be there, so near the valley in which the Golden Phantom—a phantom, indeed!—was buried.

"Time enough, gov'nor," lazily drawled Earl, a cigar between his teeth. "The Daisy is all right. He's working for wages, but he'll do his level best to earn them."

"He'd sell us out for an extra dollar!" snarled the old man.

"But who's to offer it? Not the other party. They don't like Lop-eared Mose, for reasons. And that's just why I feel so confident that the honest rascal will do his best for us," laughed the son, with a provoking carelessness.

With a surly growl, the elder villain turned away. He dared not quarrel with his son, whom he found foolishly inclined to take the reins of management into his own hands. He could not endure having his gnawing anxiety made a mocking jest of. There was so much at stake! He had risked all on this venture! Failure for him, success for Rex Stuart, one or either meant the escape of his hated half-brother from the toils he had so cunningly cast around him.

Left by himself, Earl Wingfold grew serious enough. He, too, was wondering why Lop-eared Mose delayed his report so long. He was also mentally discussing the chances for or against treachery on the part of the ex-convict, and though reason told him the Droop-eared Daisy had every incentive to remain faithful to their cause, certain doubts and fears troubled him far more keenly than he chose to betray to his parent.

It was growing dusk, and still no signs of Mose Sawyer. Damon Wingfold snarled and growled and cursed. Earl laughed and mocked and yawned. Both were uneasy, though one succeeded in hiding every trace from all save himself. And he was the one who first reached his feet with a cry of mingled relief and anger as one of the men exclaimed:

"Somebody comin' over yender! Foot-back—reckon it's Mose!"

But he was mistaken in his reckoning, as a moment later showed. It was not Lop-eared Mose, but another of the party, one so unobtrusive, so insignificant in appearance and manner, so modest and retiring, that his temporary absence had passed unheeded.

"Have you seen anything of Sawyer?" sharply demanded Earl Wingfold, as he met the fellow, who jerked off his hat, half-bowing, half-cowering before the young blood.

"Sorry I hain't, boss," was the meek response, those gray, shifty eyes just snatching a sidelong glance into the face of his employer.

"Where the deuce have you been? What do you mean by gawking about in the open, when orders are to keep close and make little sign until Lop-eared Mose brings in a report?"

More humbly than ever the little man drooped his head, and his voice was hardly audible as he ventured to mutter:

"I see'd somethin' over yender like a smoke, boss, an' so, I didn't think it'd be sech a mighty risk of I was keeful, while mebbe I might discover summat wuth the while. An' so, boss, ef I ain't takin' too much onto my own self, which the land knows I don't want, why—"

"Drop that infernal whining, and speak out white!" sharply interposed Earl, one hand falling heavily on the fellow's shoulder. "You saw a smoke? You went to trace it up? What did you discover?"

"Was fooled in the smoke, boss, sence it turned out to be a sort o' streaky cloud, like—"

A curse parted Earl's lips, and the little man cowered still more, lifting one elbow just as a boy does when he anticipates a cuff from one whom he dare not openly resist. And much in the same fashion, too, came his hasty excuse for a reprieve:

"No fire—but camp, over thar!"

None too soon. Earl Wingfold held his hand, and the little man appeared to breathe more freely, though his tongue still seemed more than he could manage with ease or expertness.

Still, by dint of questions and sifting a few kernels from a vast amount of useless chaff, the following facts were agreed upon. There was another party in the neighborhood. That party, like themselves, had gone into an early camp. Like them, too, there was little straying away from the camp, little to betoken a band of hunters or fishers. Indeed, to a suspicious mind, it was not difficult to imagine them rather anxious to avoid observation.

One thing more—and this assertion brought sharp ejaculations from the lips of both father and son, while the same wild suspicion was read one by the other as their glowing eyes met—there was a young woman traveling with the party!

"What did she look like? What was the color of her eyes, her hair? Describe her as closely as you can, my fine fellow!" hurriedly uttered Earl, his face flushed and his dark eyes aglow with an evil light.

"Waal, boss, I wouldn't like to say fer sure, bein' as I never was no great han' at takin' stock o' the wimmen," drawled the little man, dubiously scratching the tip of his nose.

"Was she tall or short, young or middle-aged, a lady, or a common woman? You can tell that much, can't you?" snapped Damon Wingfold, not a whit less excited than was his hopeful offspring.

"She was what I'd call a right smart chunk of a gal," was the deliberate response, each word being weighed before utterance. "She wasn't so tall as some, nur yit she wasn't quite as stumpy as others I've see'd, while I don't reckon she was so overly old, though mebbe—"

Damon Wingfold gave vent to a snarling curse of utter disgust and fled. Earl frowned, checking that lazy flow of words that committed the author to nothing positive.

"You can guide me within sight of this camp, if necessary?"

"Waal, I don't reckon but what I mought, ef—"

"Go get yourself something to eat, and hold yourself ready to act as guide if I decide to pay our neighbors a visit. And, by the way, you needn't try to tell everybody in camp just what you have seen. Time is short, and men are mortal. Get out, will you?"

"Waal, ef you say so, boss, an' I ain't—"

Earl Wingfold paused not to hear the remainder, but hastened to look up his worthy sire, finding him in the one small tent which they had brought along for their especial benefit.

"What did you find out, sonny?" the old man eagerly asked, as Earl dropped the flap behind him and sunk down on the bundle of dry grass which was to serve as seat by day and mattress by night. "I couldn't stand it any longer. It was all I could do to keep from taking the whining scoundrel by the throat and shaking his information out in a lump!"

"That there is a camp near us, with a girl or a woman along: nothing more definite than that. But, daddy, what if it *should* be?"

Damon Wingfold shook his head, with a short, hard laugh.

"Is it likely? What would bring her out here?"

"What brought us out? Interest in that infernal Rex Stuart! Perhaps she heard of our following him. Perhaps she has—bah!" with an impatient flinging out of one hand. "Why surmise, when the truth is so easy to get at? I'll know the facts before the night is many hours older!"

"If it *should* be! If the devil has thrown such a glorious opportunity in our way, Earl," muttered the old sinner with glowing eyes, "it would be worse than a sin if we didn't make the most of it!"

The younger rascal laughed shortly. Vague though the meaning seemed on the surface, right well he knew what Damon Wingfold was thinking of. And then, drawing closer together, talking in low, guarded tones, they discussed the matter until the shuffling footsteps of the man bringing them their supper, warned them to cease for the time being.

Directly after this meal was finished, Earl Wingfold sought out the little man, Giles Gregory by name, and drawing him aside, talked in whispers for some few minutes, ending by slipping out of camp without attracting attention from any of the men.

They rode along through the shadows of night for some rods at a slow rate, until satisfied that they were out of ear-shot, then touched up their animals, dashing along merrily, Gregory a few paces in advance.

"Keep straight on until as near as it is prudent to go with our horses," Earl Wingfold said.

However clumsy he might be with his tongue, Gregory was apparently at home as a guide, keeping on at a steady rate, turning now to the left, now to the right whenever occasion demanded, without the slightest hesitation or appearance of doubt. It was plain enough he had made a careful study of the intervening ground during his scout.

"I don't reckon mebbe we'd best go so mighty much closter, boss," he muttered, drawing rein near a point of rocks and scattered bowlders.

"How close are we to the camp?" demanded Earl, whose keen eyes had vainly searched for some indication by which he could judge for himself. "Talk up, and to the point!"

"Waal, I wouldn't like to say to a foot—quarter, reckon!"

Earl Wingfold leaned over in the saddle, and shook a hard fist directly before the eyes of the drawling scout, bringing forth the desired information much sooner than he dared hope for.

"Good enough, old man," with a grim laugh as he swung himself out of the saddle. "Talk like that all the time, and we'll get along splendidly together. 'Light and bring your animal after me. We can hitch in here, and run little risk of any one's stumbling over them before we get back."

The horses were hitched a few yards up the slope, guarded against discovery by the thick-lying boulders and an occasional clump of bushes and stunted trees. Then, after carefully marking the location, to guard against missing the animals in case of an emergency, Earl Wingfold motioned Giles to lead the way.

Two-score yards carried them over the little rise, and then they came to a sudden halt. Directly before them, only a few hundred yards away, rose a bright light, plainly a camp-fire.

"The same place you meant?" muttered Earl, turning to Gregory.

That worthy nodded. He seemed in holy awe of this impetuous young fellow who was not content to let a man talk as nature dictated. So far as possible he meant to trust to signs hereafter.

"All right. You keep at my heels, and ready for fighting or running just as I give the example," coolly uttered Wingfold, crouching under cover as well as might be, and rapidly approaching the camp.

This he had not yet fairly seen, though the red light of a fire was plain enough; but ere long he came around a little curve in the base of the hill and could see quite distinctly.

The camp was pitched between the base of the hills and the little river which wound along through the valley, the level tract being well supplied with grass for the animals, which he could see grazing a few rods below the camp proper.

This consisted of two small tents, pitched side by side, partially hidden from view by a bending tree and a half-circle of shrubbery. A fire was built a few paces in front of the tents, and beside this—

Instinctively his hand rose to cover his lips, for an involuntary cry rose in his throat, as he saw two figures move out from the tents and pause in the full light of the camp-fire. An oath, not of anger or disappointment, however; rather of fierce, vicious exultation.

One was tall, thin, stoop-shouldered, white-haired; the other trim, graceful, moving with an elastic step that spoke of youth and perfect health. As yet their faces were hidden from the glittering gaze of the spy, but he needed not that additional proof as to their identity.

The man was Maurice Wingfold, and the woman was his daughter, Precious!

It was a remarkable coincidence, truly, but Earl Wingfold did not waste time in asking what it all meant. He knew almost as surely as though he had been told in plain words, what had brought them to this wild, remote spot. He knew that they must have learned of the party in chase of Rex Stuart, and were seeking to find and put him on his guard.

Instead of uneasiness or fear, this belief only sent a thrill of grim pleasure through his veins. With the information which Maurice Wingfold naturally possessed, it proved to him that Rex Stuart must be in their immediate neighborhood. And that meant the close proximity of the long lost cache!

A single glance showed him that Maurice Wingfold had come well prepared to fight or resist attack should trouble ensue. Near a second fire, built a few rods away and partly hidden from the covert in which the two spies crouched Earl Wingfold could catch glimpses of armed men, though he could not tell just how strong the force was. Nor did he try very long, for the sweet, clear voice of Precious Wingfold came to his ears, and in hopes of learning something of importance, he listened.

"Not back yet, father!" and there was a trace of impatient anxiety in her tones as she glanced toward the lower campfire.

"Not yet," was the response. "I don't think I can have made a mistake in the spot, though I only had a glimpse of the chart. If that hot-headed boy—"

A little hand fitted over his lips, cutting short the speech.

Maurice Wingfold laughed as he took the hand prisoner.

"I'm not going to abuse Rex, little one. He's a fine fellow, if he has acted a little hastily. I never fairly appreciated him before, but now—if he only brings to light that long lost treasure!"

"In finding one treasure for you, father, he will win one for himself? Is that what you were about to say?" archly laughed the maiden, blushing divinely, little thinking what a baneful

glare was fixed upon her fair face at that very moment.

"Wait and see what Rex will say, a year from hence, you little vixen!" laughed the old man, falling in with her humor, though his face soon grew grave and troubled again, his voice likewise altering: "If Jones would only return! I can't think what is keeping him so long!"

"If he only brings Rex back with him, father!" quickly added Precious, her hands clasping, her eyes glowing in the firelight.

"And Rex brings the Gold Phantom!" added Wingfold, laughing nervously. "If wishes were horses, how grandly we might all travel!"

They fell into silence, sitting beside the cheery camp-fire, gazing into the glowing embers, each busied with thoughts which Earl Wingfold had no difficulty in interpreting correctly. His own eyes were glowing with an ugly, dangerous light. His hand fumbled mechanically at his pistol, and if looks could kill, Maurice Wingfold would never have risen to his feet unaided again.

That mention of "Jones" troubled him. Could it be Jack Jones, the same rough diamond who had risked his life in defense of Rex Stuart that night in Denver, when he and his "heelers" sought to put an enemy out of the way and gain an important clew to the lost cache at the same time? If so—if he was out scouting—might not he discover that other camp? Might he not find the two horses hidden away among those rocks, and thus suspect the truth? If so—

Earl Wingfold was just on the point of beating a retreat, when he saw Maurice rise to his feet and move toward the lower fire, leaving Precious alone. She did not appear to notice the action, her eyes bent on the fire, a pleased smile playing around her red lips.

Earl Wingfold showed his teeth savagely. If the fires were only a few yards further apart! Or if his good horse was nearer by! One bold dash—a few moments of exposure—a hard gallop—and they would hold the enemy wholly at their mercy. For where his loved child was threatened with death or worse, surely even the love of gold would not be sufficient to make Maurice Wingfold hold out long!

Even as the fierce temptation assailed him, he saw Precious Wingfold rise to her feet. Hoping that she might return to her tent, the rear of which he could gain under cover of the bushes, Earl waited and watched, only to draw a deep, hissing breath as he saw the maiden slowly move away toward the murmuring stream.

For a moment he felt like cursing his luck, when his eyes flashed anew. Might it not even yet be accomplished? There was a gentle fall to the ground. A bush or two would aid their shade. It was worth the risk, if he could see a possibility of success.

He turned and motioned Gregory to retreat the way they had come. And when beyond danger of being overheard, he spoke hastily:

"Strip off your shirt and give it to me. I'm going to capture the girl, if it can be done, and I want you to keep close behind, ready to lend a hand if necessary. If she gives a yelp, be ready to fight or run as you see me do. I can depend on you?"

The little man nodded, emphatically.

"If you fail me, I'll send a bullet through your head—mind that, my fine fellow!" muttered Earl, as he assisted the other in removing his heavy flannel shirt.

Gregory grinned faintly, but did not venture to trust his tongue.

Wingfold rolled the shirt up and tucked it under his arm, crouching low and creeping along toward the river, keeping hidden from view of the enemy around the lower fire. This was no difficult task, thanks to the favorable lay of the ground, and he quickly caught sight of the maiden, who was standing near a large rock that partly hung over the water. She was gazing upon the water, here shallow, rippling over a pebbly bed, its murmur proving very serviceable to the villain who was so silently stealing upon her.

Precious was buried in thought, one arm resting on the rock. She had no thought of danger. Why should she, so near to camp, with a dozen pair of strong arms to defend her in case of need?

She was thinking of Rex Stuart, whom she expected to see before many more hours passed. Thinking—

Earl Wingfold leaped forward, flinging the flannel shirt over her head and face, twisting it tightly as he flung her to the ground, falling on and using every effort to smother her cries, his weight holding her helpless. And then strong fingers closed about her throat, until her senses reeled, fled—and all was a blank!

CHAPTER XVII.

GUIDED BY A PHANTOM.

It was mere nervous impatience that impelled Maurice Wingfold to pass over to the campfire where his men were engaged in cooking and eating their supper. Only a few minutes before he had come from there, assured that none of them had heard or seen aught of Jack Jones, their guide. He knew that such would be the answer now, for Jones would at once report to

him, the nominal head of the expedition, the moment he came back from his investigating round.

But there was so much at stake. His veins seemed filled with quicksilver rather than ordinary blood. He could not rest quiet.

He spent a few minutes with his men, then slowly returned to his own camp-fire. He was a little surprised at the absence of Precious, but supposing her to have returned to the privacy of her tent, he said nothing, sitting down before the fire, one hand supporting his head, his thin face grave, his eyes filled with an anxious light.

He was thinking over the curious events of recent days, as coupled with the tragic past.

In the note which he left behind him, Rex Stuart fully explained his reasons for leaving Denver so hastily, and after such an unceremonious fashion. He gave his reasons for thinking Nettie Malcom a paid spy in the employ of the enemy. And then came Jack Jones, one of the original "barnacles" of '59, whom Maurice Wingfold had frequently employed during his periodical hunts for the lost cache, telling him of the dastardly assault on Rex Stuart the night before. And not only that, but how viciously Damon Wingfold and his son were hunting for the young man, too eager to hide their movements from eyes so keen as his.

Jack had more than a suspicion of how matters stood between young Stuart and Precious. He himself loved the fair girl, much as a father might love the darling child of his old age; and for this reason he brought his budget to Maurice Wingfold.

And in the middle of the night he roused the speculator to tell him how hurriedly Damon Wingfold and a goodly party had taken horse and ridden out of Denver, bound for the hills.

No need to add his conviction that they were on the track of Rex Stuart. Both Precious and her father divined the truth as by instinct. And fearing, the one for his long-coveted gold, the other for her lover, they urged Jack Jones to lose no time in getting a dozen good men, with a suitable outfit, ready for the road. And before the shades of another night fell over the earth, the third party rode rapidly away from Denver on the trail which was to end at the valley in which was buried the Gold Phantom.

Thus sat Maurice Wingfold when "Old Jack Jones" returned, his rugged, weather-beaten countenance containing more emotions than one. He cast a covert glance toward the little tents as he lowered his voice in answering the old man, who leaped to his feet with a breathless eagerness that almost defeated his wishes.

"Ef I didn't find the boy, I found Lis signs."

Thar was his hosses an' his mules an' his outfit."

"Where, then, was he?" exclaimed Maurice Wingfold, uneasily.

"You tell!" muttered Jones, with a nervous glance toward the tent from whence he expected every instant to behold Precious emerge, glowing with glad hopes. "I waited until it was growin' dark, but they didn't nobody turn up. An' so—without stretchin' it out too fur—I jest left a sign which he'd be mighty apt to see an' onderstan' the fu'st off, then moseyed back."

"It is strange!" muttered Maurice, uneasily. "Surely that demon cannot have found him first, and wiped the party out?"

Jones gave another glance toward the tent, his tones low and soft:

"I didn't see no sign. I don't reckon it's as bad as that; but them cusses ain't so mighty fur off, now I tell you, boss!"

"You saw them, then?"

"I see a camp-fire, or the light o' one, ruther, as I was makin' fer this, an' tuck a sorter scout over you'. I wasn't runnin' too lig resks, ye onderstan', boss, but I see two or three critters as I knowed was in the row that night when the imps tried fer to down Rex. Ef the head imps was in the outfit, they lay mighty close, an' I didn't see nothin' of 'em."

Once more Jack Jones glanced toward the tents, thinking how strange it was that Precious kept so close under cover. As for Maurice Wingfold, he was deep buried in thought, his face hard-set, his sunken eyes filled with an uneasy gleam.

If he had known what was passing through the troubled brain of his guide at that moment, his mental torture would have been doubled.

It was true that Jones had discovered the hasty camp of the gold-hunters, but he had made a still more interesting discovery, though it was one that sorely puzzled him and almost defied explanation.

A pit where the dirt had been vigorously cast around, with tools lying just where they had been dropped by those who had handled them. A number of half-rotted skin bags, some still intact, others slashed open with a knife, half-emptied, their contents being worthless pebbles and sand! And when he opened the remaining ones, it was to find the same worse than valueless contents.

What did it mean? Was this the treasure so many years had been wasted in hunting for?

"Whar's the little lady, boss?" at length asked Jones.

"In her tent, I suppose. Precious!"

No answer. Jones started toward the tent,

but before he could take a second step, a wild, wailing cry rent the air, seemingly coming from overhead. And as the two men stared in amaze—as the others around the lower camp-fire leaped up with cries and ejaculations of surprise, staring around them—a fiery object suddenly appeared high over the camp, falling with a distinct click close to Jack Jones.

"Look out, boys! Injun work!" he cried, whipping out a revolver and crouching as though about to leap to cover.

But Maurice Wingfold sprang forward and snatched up the missile. It was a long arrow, its flint-head bound about with flaming tow, a bit of paper wrapped around the shaft.

"Close in an' kiver the gal!" grated Jones, only to start back from the empty tent, his bronzed face turning yellow with fear and amazement. And just then Maurice Wingfold uttered a wild cry.

"Gone! my darling! And I so blindly standing by!"

He held a paper in his trembling hand, and Jack Jones snatched it from his fingers. In plain bold characters he read:

"The hawk has stolen the dove. If you would save her from worse than death, turn to the hills and look for a red light. There the beginning of the trail may be seen. THE GOLD PHANTOM."

Jack Jones did not stop to count the cost. He turned his head to the startled men, crying as he leaped past the tents:

"Kiver me, boys, an' let 'em hev it, the fu'st glimp' ye ketch!"

Though he might have doubted the genuineness of this strangely delivered warning had he taken time for a second thought, Jones paused not for that. Though there might be an ambush directly before him, he obeyed his first impulse and dashed direct for the thick-lying rocks as bidden by that message. And, scarce had he taken a dozen steps before a red light leaped up before him, illuminating the wild scene with almost the distinctness of sunlight.

"Close up—seek it to the fu'st critter ye see!" grated Jones, slackening his pace a little, but still pressing on.

And then—he stood beside a prostrate figure, from whose bosom protruded a feathered shaft!

This much they all saw, before the red light died out, as suddenly as it had leaped into existence. But this was no longer a mystery. One and all had seen the ruddy blaze, curling about the shaft of the death-dealing arrow.

"It's a man-critter, boss!" muttered Jack Jones as Maurice Wingfold uttered a cry of horror and grief combined, having caught but a glimpse of the dread object. "None o' our gang, nuther!"

"Yer's fresh drappin's, whar a boss hes bin hitched, Jack!" called out one of the party, excitedly.

"Hold yer persish, every critter, er mebbe ye'll rub the sign out," the guide cried, sternly. "Some o' you take the old gent. He's gone fainty, I reckon, from the way he hangs onto my arm."

"Precious—my child! Save her from those demons!" huskily muttered Wingfold, seemingly crushed by this bitter and unexpected blow.

"We'll do it ef it's on the keords, boss, be sure o' that," soothingly replied the guide, passing the old man over to the men who were nearest him, adding hastily: "Take him back the way we come, fer a few rods. Mebbe they's a trick hid in this thing, an' they ain't no need o' runnin' more resk then we hev to. Straight back, an' keep your tools ready ef anythin' shows up—lively, every soul o' ye!"

When he spoke in that tone of voice, few men who knew him cared to disobey or even argue the point. As one man his comrades fell back toward the camp, leaving Jack Jones alone beside the body.

Doffing his broad-brimmed hat, using it as a shield, to cast all the light to the ground, Jones struck a match and lit a small bit of candle which he took from his "handy-bag."

He turned the light first on the face of the dead man. A single glance showed him that he was dead. The arrow had passed through his heart, probably carrying instant death with it.

Though Jack Jones failed to recognize the face, it was that of Giles Gregory. His upper body was still bare, just as he had stripped it to give Earl Wingfold the flannel shirt with which Precious Wingfold was smothered into silence and helplessness. The arrow in his hairy breast was of the same make as the one which had conveyed that fiery warning to the men in camp.

Only a moment or two did Jack Jones waste on the corpse. Bending low, keeping the light well covered, allowing the rays to spread scarce two feet, he moved to the spot from whence his man had announced his discovery. It was true. There, where the ground was considerably trampled, lay fresh droppings. Beyond a doubt, two animals had been tethered to those bushes, less than an hour ago!

The soil was hard and full of gravel, but poorly suited for receiving and retaining a trail, but Jack Jones managed to find sign sufficient to convince him that the horses had returned to the more level ground at the base of the hills. And then, putting out his light, he strode back

to camp, a signal whistle bringing the men after him.

"They's only one way to look at it, boss," he said, as Maurice Wingfold confronted him, pale, trembling, sadly shaken by this heavy blow. "Them devils is camped over yender. They must 'a' smoked us out, an' comin' to see who we are, they gobbled the lady."

"Lead the way—I'll tear their hearts out!" panted Maurice, his eyes glowing redly. "Quick! that demon will kill her!"

"We'll do the best we know, of course, boss, but you ain't fit—"

"I'm going! I'll go alone if you are afraid!" snarled the half-distracted father, moving toward the horses.

For a moment Jack Jones was strongly tempted to use force, since he saw plain enough that sober reason would avail nothing. He hesitated for a brief space, counting the cost on either side. Then—as he reflected how urgent was the necessity of cool and concerted action—he leaped forward and caught the madman around the arms, twisting him from his feet and gently laying him on the ground, flat on his back.

"It's all fer her good, boss!" he muttered, holding Maurice Wingfold helpless, adding earnestly: "You know I'd give my life to sarve her, any minnit. You know I'm goin' to do all that man kin to git her out o' trouble. You know ef Damon Wingfold an' his ugly cub hes got thar grips onto the pore little gal, they'll fight mighty hard to keep her ag'in' us. An' ef I wasn't boilin' over mad, you'd see that the only way to git ahead o' them p'izen cusses is to go at it cool an' stiddy. 'Stead o' that, you're rippin' an' snortin' like a crazy bedbug! You'd let 'em know he was at 'em, long enough afore 'ithin reach, fer them to hide her out o' the way."

At first Maurice Wingfold struggled desperately to free himself from that stern grip, but as his first frenzy became exhausted, he lay quiet, to say as Jack Jones paused in his hurried speech:

"Let me up, man! I'll do as you say, just so you don't try to make me stop behind. That I'll never consent to!"

Jones permitted him to rise, lending him a hand, adding:

"Won't you do it ef it's fer the good o' the little gal, boss?"

"I can fight as well as the best of you!"

"Tain't so much the fightin', boss, as it is the cool gittin' at it," quickly responded the guide. "We kin clean 'em out easy enough, ef we take time to git in the fu'st licks, though they're a mighty hard gang, or thar looks tells lies. But you're so red-hot you'd let 'em know we was comin', too quick! You'd give 'em chances to putt out with the gal, an' mebbe make a andbush fer us to run our noses in afore we was ready—don't you see?"

Maurice doggedly shook his gray head.

"She is my child—all I have left in this world! She is in peril—in worse danger than even you can suspect! I'm going to her rescue, if I have to go alone. And I'll kill the first man that lays hands on me to keep me back—I swear it!"

Jack Jones gave a snort of disgust, but made the best of a bad bargain.

"Say you'll hold in ontel I say the right time is come fer work. Promise this, as a white man, an' you kin go along. Ef you won't promise, kill or no kill, I'll tie you up han' an' foot an' leave you ahind! It is the little lady I'm thinkin' of the most."

Maurice Wingfold saw that the sturdy guide meant every word he uttered, and he unhesitatingly gave the required pledge. He did this so readily, that Jones eyed him dubiously. There was far too wild a light in those haggard eyes for him to fully trust such a pledge; but what else could he do, under the circumstances?

"All right. Git the critters ready, boys! It ain't so fur, but we'll ride as nigh as we kin. Mebbe we'll need the hosses. They may take a notion to run fer it, now they've got the little angel!"

Partly to keep Maurice Wingfold in play, partly to lend him a more substantial strength than that of his feverish excitement, Jones gave the old man a flask of liquor and encouraged him to drink heartily.

"They may be a long an' tough ride afore us," he said, in explanation. "Them imps must know we wouldn't be long afore findin' out thar devilment, an' that we wouldn't rest easy ontel we'd got even. Mebbe they'll think to bluff us off, with the little angel fer a hand, but then ag'in mebbe they'll try to dodge us in the dark by takin' foot-bail. Anyway, you'll need all the stren'th you kin git."

"If I once get my hands on the throat of that hellhound, he'll find I'm strong enough—curse him!" grated the old man.

"An' double cuss him, with his gang throwed in, ef you like," cheerfully assented the guide as he assisted Maurice to mount his horse.

"All the same, you want to keep your promise in mind. I'm workin' under you as a boss I know; but when it comes to you or the little angel, I'm stickin' by her every time! An' ef you putt her in danger by making a wild break, down you go though you was my own pap! You understand?"

"Haven't I given you my word of honor?" snapped the old man.

"Which I'm goin' to hold ye to, boss. You're to stick cluss to me, an' not make a break without I say you kin."

The party was mounted, armed, ready for hot work in case their end could not be gained without. At a sign from Jones, who kept within easy reach of Maurice Wingfold, the little band fell in behind their guide, who struck across the level in a direction that would carry them to the broken ground, only a few hundred yards lower down than where the camp was pitched which Jones had discovered that evening, providentially, as it now seemed.

He had not a doubt but that some of this party had abducted Precious Wingfold, though he could not even guess how it was managed so near to her defenders, without arousing even a ghost of a suspicion.

Though he had not actually seen either Damon Wingfold or his son, Earl, Jones had crept close enough to the camp-fire to recognize at least two men who he knew had been with the young blood when he attempted to "down" Rex Stuart. And this convinced him that the party was the same one which had left Denver under lead of Damon Wingfold.

Granting this, who else could have committed the outrage.

Long before reaching the point which he led in mind, Jones caught sight of a faint glow hovering over the tops of the bushes which served to screen the camp. This seemed favorable to their plans, but he was far too experienced to run any wild risks. If the camp was deserted, a few minutes lost would matter but little in the end. If it was still occupied, as he hoped and believed, they might gain much by taking a preliminary view, if not win an advantage which would insure them complete victory before a single blow was dealt or a shot fired.

For some little distance he had kept the party at a walk, lest the rapid trampling of hoofs alarm the enemy. And as he neared the point where he determined to leave the horses, he spoke guardedly, yet loud enough for all to catch his words:

"We'll light an' hitch, in a bit, boys. I'll go on ahead to take a look at the critters, an' mebbe make out all we want to know most. Ef I kin see anythin' o' the gal, an' she's whar I kin grab her an' make kiver ag'in afore the imps kin riddle us, I'll do it. Ef I do, you'll hear the row, an' then you want to wade in fer all you're wuth!"

"It's dark enough so we kin crawl up pritty close, 'thout runnin' any resk o' bein' spotted," Jack, suggested one of the men.

"Ef I could trust you, boss!" muttered the guide, dubiously.

"I'm going with you on your scout," was the quick response.

"Not ef I know myself!"

"Then I'll go alone," doggedly, as a quick touch of the spur carried his horse beyond the grasp of the guide's hand. "It's my child. It's my place to rescue her, or at least play a man's part."

"Ef you ondy would!" sniffed Jones, in a tone of thorough disgust. "Ef you ondy wouldn't keep playin' the durned fool!"

"Which is it: alone, or with you?"

"With me, ef you will resk all that-a-way," was the sullen reply.

"You shall have no furtler fault to find with me, Jones," added Wingfold as he drew rein with the rest, but keeping a watchful eye on the guide, as though anticipating another swift assault. "I'll act as silently as your shadow, but I can't lay idle while my child is in such bitter peril! It would drive me mad!"

"Hev it so; but mind. Ef you play the fool, I'll treat you like a fool. I'll kill you ruther then hev her come to harm through your bull-headedness! I mean jest what I'm tellin' you, boss."

Maurice Wingfold made no reply, and Jack Jones quickly finished his instructions to his men. Now that the matter of the father was settled, his plans were very simple.

They two were to steal around the camp and approach it from the opposite side. If possible, they were to ascertain if Precious Wingfold was in the camp. If she was, and a fair chance offered for "cutting her out," Jones was to make the effort, and his men were to take care of the enemy.

To the better do this, they were to creep as close to the camp as they could without running too much risk of being prematurely discovered. They were to make no move unless an alarm was given. If not, they were to wait until Jones came back with his report. After that, circumstances were to guide their further action.

Still distrusting the prudence of his self-invited companion, Jack Jones again urged Wingfold to leave him untrammelled, but in vain. And then he set off, making his way along the edge of the broken ground, as being less liable to discovery than moving on the bare, level plain.

As he proceeded, he saw with grim satisfaction that Maurice Wingfold was cool and steady enough to imitate his movements with equal silence and celerity. If he would only remain the same!

Gradually they passed around the little camp, and their hopes waxed higher as they saw that, while talking and occasionally laughing, the enemy seemed on their guard. If they expected no attack, if they had given no occasion for such, would they be so well prepared?

Still on, until they could leave the broken ground for the level, and gain a point almost directly opposite that which the main force was to cover. And then, moving foot by foot, parting the bushes without making a rustle to betray them, Jack Jones led the way to a point from whence he could part the leafy screen and gaze directly out upon the camp of the enemy.

"Stiddy, now, boss!" warningly muttered Jones, as he peered forth.

Close beside him Maurice Wingfold looked out, his breath coming short and quick as he caught sight of Damon Wingfold just emerging from the little tent. Jones turned toward him, warned by the savage curse that came from those thin lips, but he was too late!

"You devil! give me back my child!" screamed Damon, firing as he sprung forward upon his hated half-brother, who uttered a wild cry of terror as he turned to flee, closely pursued by the avenger.

And with wild yells, the men charged camp, shooting at every jump!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GRAVE GIVES UP ITS DEAD.

A STRANGE scene, truly!

The outer chamber of Dark Durg's den was lighted up with a dozen candles. The table, the stools, the rude bed had disappeared, leaving only the grim weapons on the walls.

On one side, sitting on the rock floor, their backs propped against the rough wall, were four men, their hands and feet bound, their jaws gagged, only their gleaming eyes telling of life and sensibility.

On one hand, George Little; on the other Mark Oberlin; between them, elbow to elbow, Rex Stuart and Louis Knapp!

To the right, lying on a few skins, his head raised and supported against the rock wall, is Humpy Dick, his face thin and deathlike, but with a wild, intense glitter in his sunken eyes.

To their left, nearer the passage which leads to the second chamber, is a gaunt, gray-haired figure, bound and gagged just as the four gold-hunters are. But in his eyes one can detect little save terror, while theirs are glowing with stern indignation and a longing for revenge for the outrage they have received.

Directly opposite the gold-hunters, two men are lying, their heads also slightly elevated, as though to afford them a fair view of their surroundings. One shows a broad bruise crossing his temple and one eye. The other shows blood-stained bandages about his person, while his thin, foxy-looking face seems blanched by the loss of blood. The first is Earl Wingfold. The second is his father, Damon Wingfold.

A strange congregation, truly!

How came they there? By what wonderful address had Dark Durg succeeded in bringing all his enemies to this one spot, each one helpless and at his mercy?

After leaving Rex Stuart with Humpy Dick, Dark Durg led the three gold-hunters back to the first chamber. He placed food and drink before them, partaking heartily himself, and thus banishing the faint suspicions which lingered in the mind of Louis Knapp.

Whether the Ishmael of the Hills deceived their eyes by a cunning pretense, or whether he really ate and drank with them, trusting to a stronger constitution or to an antidote against the poison which so suddenly and completely deprived them of the power of speech and motion, certain it is that he was apparently unaffected, while they fell heavily to the rock floor, where Rex Stuart beheld them a few minutes later, apparently dead. For himself, after being choked to insensibility, he was bound and gagged, to ultimately recover his senses and find himself in company with his mates, all equally alive, equally helpless.

Damon Wingfold had wounded his brother, but not sufficiently to disable him or check his mad flight. He followed through the bushes, into the gulch, over rocks and obstacles, his eyes filled with blood, the long-nursed hatred overpowering all else, urging him on without thought or fatigue or danger, even as a sudden panic lent Damon Wingfold power to flee so far and for so long.

There was a grapple, a fall, a mad, wild-beast-like fight where claws and teeth took the place of more deadly weapons. There was a dizzy whirl, ending in a blank, broken by a return to consciousness in this cave; for the white-haired man who reclined on the left of the gold-hunters, was none other than Maurice Wingfold.

And Earl Wingfold?

All he could have said, were the use of his lips given him, runs thus: A sharp, whistling sound past his ears just as he reaches the horses with Precious Wingfold in his arms, silent, senseless, wholly at his mercy. A gurgling, gasping groan as Giles Gregory sinks down in death, an arrow through his heart. Then—a mountain seems to fall upon his head, and he knows no more for hours.

When consciousness did return, his limbs were bound, his eyes were blinded. And thus they remained until he was brought here, to be placed beside his father, likewise a helpless captive.

Grim and silent, alone and unassisted, Dark Durg had arranged them after this fashion, then vanished through the narrow passage leading to the second chamber, from that to still a third, where he now stood before a young woman, pale, trembling, yet still more than ordinarily lovely in face as she was graceful and perfect in figure.

"I can trust your ears, but not your eyes nor tongue," he was saying, in cold, measured tones as he dropped a dark cloth over her head, securing it about her waist with a cord. "Swear that you will not utter a word until I give you permission, by removing this blind, or, disagreeable as such a course will be to me, I must gag you as well."

"I promise, if—"

"You shall see your father—shall greet your lover, alive and well," interposed the Ishmael of the Hills.

"Then—I promise what you ask!"

Dark Durg supported and guided her footsteps as he led the way to the outer chamber, pausing in the center of the apartment, gazing sternly over those startled faces, even as he and his veiled companion were stared at. And as Rex Stuart uttered an inarticulate cry, striving to burst his bonds, believing he recognized his loved one, Dark Durg drew a long knife and held it poised above the maiden's heart, his eyes flashing viciously, his face hard and merciless.

Unconscious of this, Precious Wingfold leaned upon his arm, trembling, breathlessly waiting the end of this painful mystery. And seeing how defenseless she was, how impotent were his maddest efforts, Rex Stuart yielded, with a silent appeal for mercy filling his eyes.

Then, cutting little time to waste, Dark Durg spoke:

"Why have I taken so much trouble to gather you together? Listen for a few minutes, and you can answer that question yourselves."

Without further preface, he told the story of the ill-starred expedition which left Cherry Creek, before Denver was Denver. He briefly but clearly explained the terms on which that party was formed. How Sterling Coin, acting as guide, was to receive one-fourth of the amount gained by the entire party. How Milo Garth, in return for fitting them all out for the trip, paying for everything, was to receive another fourth part, leaving the remaining half to be divided among the six men who completed the party.

He told of their success in finding much gold, but as his words were but little more than a repetition of the story told by Humpy Dick on that eventful night in Denver, which has already been placed before the reader, there is no need of following him closely until after passing the point where Humpy Dick spoke of the account given by the man who went out on a hunt with Milo Garth.

"Up to the moment when they separated at the foot of the hill up which the wounded elk had dashed, one to take each side of the hill in hopes of striking the blood-trail on the other slope, Milo Garth had never even suspected how Damon Wingfold hated him, much less did he anticipate that his life was being plotted against, through greed of gold.

"Being quick of foot and sound of wind, Milo Garth reached the further side ahead of his comrade, and satisfying himself that the elk had not crossed the hill, but was in all probability lying dead near the top, he waited for the coming of his comrade. And while so doing, he interested himself in examining a curious grave and its contents.

"On a rude scaffolding of poles, standing close beside the rocky bluff which here overlooked the deep and rapid river, Milo Garth found one of those open-air tombs which are still to be occasionally met with in the heart of the hills. Wrapped in blankets, now frayed by long exposure to wind and weather, an Indian warrior rested in his last sleep. And it was while examining this that Milo Garth fell before the treacherous aim of his supposed friend, Damon Wingfold!"

The man whose name was thus coupled with an atrocious crime, writhed and squirmed, striving to deny the accusation, but in vain. His bonds were too well applied, and Dark Durg resumed:

"The shot was aimed only too truly, and Milo Garth fell. He struggled but little, yet that little was enough to cause his body to roll over and plunge downward into the roaring river! And as the assassin rushed forward, he may have caught a passing glimpse of the corpse as it was tossed here and there by the foaming, swirling waters!

"With savage curses the murderer followed the river for some distance, hoping the body would lodge, where he could produce it as evidence to sustain the cunning story he had already concocted in his mind; but he finally had to abandon that hope. The body disappeared, and he saw it no more.

"He feared to return to camp without being guarded at every point, for he knew that between Milo Garth and Sterling Coin there existed a deep and earnest love. And so he added sacrilege to murder!"

In a hard, cold tone Dark Durg repeated the story told by Humpy Dick as to the search for the remains of Milo Garth. Then he added:

"Those charred bones came from the Indian's grave! The sickening stench arose from chunks of elk-meat, and not from human flesh! And as Sterling Coin was turned deathly sick by the sight of the horrible fate which he believed had befallen his friend, it was easy to deceive the rest. And, almost without inspection, the remains were buried.

"After the first shock was overcome, only Sterling Coin gave a tear or single regret for the frightful doom which had overtaken the man to whom they all owed their rapidly increasing fortune. And before many days passed over their heads, they were openly rejoicing at his death. It would leave three-fourths to be divided between them alone; for of course the share of Sterling Coin was large enough without an addition. Large enough? Too large! Why should he be so greatly favored? He worked no harder than the rest—not so hard, indeed. And now, he worked not at all, pretending to be overcome with grief! It was but lazy hypocrisy, instead! If he only *was* sick—ill enough to—

"It was not hard to come to that point. And then, from vague mutterings, they gradually grew to cursing the poor devil, to hoping that he would soon have the good grace to clear out, to die or cut his own throat. And then—only the stealthy flight of the poor devil, more than half-mad, saved him from being murdered!

"Crime leads to crime. From the cunning story concocted by Damon Wingfold, in putting the murder of Milo Garth on an imaginary party of Indians, rose a tragedy that led to still others, that gave birth to the Gold Phantom, that brings us here to end all with a just retribution for crimes that can scarcely be paralleled even in the annals of the blood-stained gold country!

"The devil seemed playing into the hands of Damon Wingfold, for he discovered the proximity of an Indian, or, rather, a half-breed family, much as he had described on that bloody day. And partly to avenge the death of their leader, but more to prevent the possible leaking out of their golden secret, the white men stole upon this unsuspecting, innocent family, and brutally butchered them, not sparing even the babe at its mother's breast!

"What matter? They were only savages. If not full-blooded, all the worse for their mixture.

"In his half-crazed wanderings, Sterling Coin came across the scene of the massacre, but there had been others before him, since the noble avengers left their victims. Some one had collected the wolf-scattered remains, and burned them. And as Sterling Coin saw moccasin-tracks about the fire, a sudden fear cleared his clouded brain. He believed that vengeance would be sought. And forgetting how he had fled from these same men in fear for his life, forgetting all save that they were of his own color, and had once called him pard, he managed to make his way back to camp and tell his strange story.

"For days he lay weak, helpless, exhausted, little better than a dying man. And during that time, Damon Wingfold and one other, whose name I will soon pronounce, plotted together and determined to add to their riches by committing still another crime.

"Late one afternoon Damon Wingfold came in, pale and trembling, declaring that he had been twice shot at by an Indian, only escaping with life as by a miracle. That he had been pursued for more than a mile, with a malignant persistence that could only be explained in one way: the avenger feared by Sterling Coin was at last on their track!

"This was terrible tidings to all who were not in the secret, and when Damon Wingfold and his confederate proposed a hasty packing up and flight that same night, the rest gladly assented. After all, there would be little lost. The plan was pretty well worked out, and they could surely throw the avenger off the scent before reaching the fresh deposit which Sterling Coin had located for their next camp.

"And he, poor devil! little suspecting the atrocious plot of which he was destined to prove the victim, rose from his sick bed and worked busily as the best for the midnight fitting!

"The rude huts were left standing, and the usual fires were kindled in front of them. To all seeming, the camp was occupied, even after the gold-hunters had stolen silently away to where their animals were hidden with the first shades of night. And silently, ghost-like, they fled through the night from an imaginary avenger!

"To all save Damon Wingfold and his confederate, that phantom was a dreaded reality, and they, malicious as all such villains are, took delight in raising alarms as they journeyed on, chuckling in their sleeves at the terror exhibited by their dupes, little imagining how perilously near the truth they were treading all the time. For even as they fled from a phantom, as they

believed, a stern reality was on their track. Even then the avengers were stealing up to the unguarded huts which the gold-hunters had so recently abandoned!

"As the night wore on, Damon Wingfold and his fellow plotter grew more sober. The time was near when they must do the black work they had secretly plotted. Day was not so many hours distant. Before the first gray gleams of light came in the East, one more sacrifice to the demon of gold must be made.

"Silently, secretly, they made their preparations. And scarcely had they done so, when they came to a spot that promised all they could wish for. The trail which they were following, guided by the light of the nearly full moon, which would not set until after day had dawned, now rose from the narrow gulch which they had wound through for some time past. The trail was narrow. On one side the bare rocks rose almost perpendicularly. On the other was a precipitous descent. As they peered over the escarpment, even their cold blood chilled. All was dark as midnight. The keenest eye could not penetrate to the bottom.

"What lay beneath them? Was there even a ghost of a chance for one falling over the edge, to escape with life?

"Damon Wingfold resolved to make sure. He found a fragment of rock in the trail, and with his confederate listening as well, he dropped the missile over into the darkness. Second after second they counted, before the dull, faint thump came back to their waiting ears.

"Little fear of blundering this time! If the frightful fall itself did not take the breath of life away, the remorseless rocks below would make sure work!

"A few moments more, slowly, cautiously creeping along the narrow trail, men holding their breath and pressing closely to the rock wall lest a slip of the foot, the sudden giving way of a bit of frost-eaten rock, should hurl them down to certain death on the rocks below.

"And then—the foul deed was done!

"A shrill, piercing cry of uncontrollable horror! A breathless pause that seemed an age. A faint, yet blood-curdling thud coming from the black depth! And then Damon Wingfold cried out, in admirably counterfeited tones of horror and despair:

"My God! Some one's fallen from the trail!"

Strained and harsh was the voice of the Ishmael of the Hills as he uttered the words, yet with an intensity that sent the cold blood chilling to the heart of each one who heard him then. And Damon Wingfold, ghastly as a corpse in the first stages of decay, shut his eyes and cowered from the bony finger that pointed him out as a murderer!

"That 'some one' proved on investigation to be Sterling Coin," Dark Durg resumed after a brief pause, his voice colder, harder than ever. "It was too dark to see aught in the chasm beside them, but as they listened breathlessly not even a groan came back to their ears. Death must have been instantaneous, yet it was Damon Wingfold who proposed to wait where they were until the coming of day before proceeding further. It might be possible that life remained in their unfortunate comrade. And he urged the pause in the name of common humanity!

"There was no objection. Those who were in ignorance of the horrible truth, feared to move again until the light of day should come to show them the dangers of the trail. They were unnerved, and cowered on the narrow trail, pressing close to the rock wall.

"Thus they waited, and when the day dawned, when the sun rose high enough to cast its light into the deep gulch, they peered over the edge with pale faces, only to shrink back with gasps of horror as they caught a glimpse of the frightful scene.

"Not so Damon Wingfold. He gazed steadily at the shapeless mass which lay over a hundred feet below them, in a pool of blood. He marked its course by the bits of cloth that the sharp rocks had retained—by the crushed and broken bushes. And gazing, he laughed in his heart, for he now felt that his horrible secret was safe—for his confederate would not dare even hint at the black truth!

"But I dare!" Dark Durg cried, his tall form rising even taller, his black eyes glowing like living coals of fire, his bony finger menacing Damon Wingfold as he cowered in his bonds, trembling like a leaf—"I dare accuse you of causing that accident, as you called it! I dare swear you pushed Sterling Coin from the trail, to meet worse than death on the rocks below!"

A faint moan came from the veiled woman. The gold-hunters looked in horror and aversion at the accused, whose face but too plainly admitted his guilt. And Maurice Wingfold, after one frightened glance in that direction, closed his eyes and bowed his head, shivering from head to foot as though he, too, felt that stern accusation.

"I charge you thus, Damon Wingfold, and in proof—Humpy Dick," turning toward the deformed, "have I spoken one word more than the truth?"

"You have not. Damon Wingfold committed the foul deed!"

"And you know this? Who are you, then?"

"Sterling Coin, the man whom that devil tried to murder!" sharply cried the deformed, pointing a bony finger at the cringing assassin.

"And I also charge him with attempted murder!" sternly added Dark Durg, his black eyes glowing. "And I am Milo Garth!"

CHAPTER XIX.

TRIED, AND FOUND GUILTY.

ALTHOUGH they must have anticipated some such declaration, both Damon and Maurice Wingfold shrunk away as far as the nature of their position and bonds would admit, shivering with fear, something akin to horror filling their eyes.

Truly, it seemed as though the grave was giving up its dead!

Hard and pitiless Dark Durg, or Milo Garth, as he now declared himself, stood before the wretches who had so deeply wronged him in the years gone by, his eyes glowing as though but the windows to a mass of molten iron. Little hope of mercy for the criminals to be seen in that stern, hard-set face.

Though she could not see, Precious Wingfold shrunk tremblingly away from the side of the grim avenger. She felt that she was in the presence of a living death.

At the motion, Dark Durg turned and looked toward her. Doing so brought his gaze in line with Humpy Dick beyond, and he caught an eager, imploring look upon the thin, haggard face, the meaning of which he had no difficulty in interpreting.

For a brief space he hesitated, his strong grip tightening and drawing the maiden closer to his side. But then—it was as he had said: Humpy Dick was all he had left in the world to care for, all there was now to care for or love him. And in silence he led the veiled maiden to the side of the deformed, gently muttering:

"Once before you stooped to lend aid and safety to a poor, hunted being, lady; stoop now, and with your hand held in his honest grasp, listen in silence to the words I still have to utter."

"Dear lady!" softly muttered Humpy Dick, reaching up and touching the trembling hand. "No harm shall come to you. Trust me. I would die a score times over, rather than tell you a lie!"

There was something in his voice that carried conviction with it, and Precious sunk on her knees beside him, sobbing faintly. Her powers were sorely taxed. She felt sick, almost swooning away. It was all so terrible, so gloomy and tragic!

Dark Durg turned away and resumed his former position, facing Damon Wingfold, his black eyes glowing, his face hard and merciless, his tones clear and cutting, sending a cold thrill through the veins of his auditors.

"The grave has given up its dead, and both Sterling Coin and Milo Garth now come forward to bear witness against Damon Wingfold, the cowardly, treacherous assassin! Ay! even though the men whom he did his worst against are still in this world, I charge him thus: for the death he counted upon would have been heaven itself in comparison to the sufferings which we were forced to undergo!

"First, I will tell my own story—the story of Milo Garth.

"Even as you touched the trigger, Damon Wingfold," his long, bony finger shaking toward the cowering wretch, "I caught sight of your face and divined the truth! I knew you then as you were, a devilish murderer at heart, but my discovery came too late to save me from your dastardly shot. I remember feeling the horrible shock—I can even recall the first instant of that frightful plunge over the wall into the roaring river! Thousands of times since have I woken up at night with a shrill cry of intense agony, living over that frightful moment!

"The next I can recall, is a faint sensation of pain, of warmth, of spicy odors. Like one in a dream I was vaguely conscious that some one was bending over me, adjusting bandages to my hurts. But it was many hours afterward that I fairly recognized my preserver. Still more before I could either tell or listen to him tell of my adventure.

"When I was strong enough, my friend told me how he had found me lying on a rock, with my head alone above the surface, insensible, seemingly dead. And had he not recognized the face of an old friend, he said he would hardly have dared attempt to reach me; for the rock wall was high and difficult for even an unincumbered man to scale or descend. He managed to reach me, and finding life still lingering, he bore me to the shore, and finally succeeded in getting me to the place where my consciousness returned, where I now was.

"Besides many bruises, received when I fell into the river or as the swift current whirled me along its contracted bed, I was shot clean through the body, the bullet passing within an inch of my heart.

"When I told my story, naming you as the traitor, Damon Wingfold, my friend said that he would bring your scalp to help make me well.

He was but a poor, ignorant savage, you see, and he naturally thought that what would heal his own hurts, would surely aid me in recovering my strength. With him, it mattered little who dealt the blow, just so his wrongs were avenged. But with me it was different. I swore that I would repay you, Damon Wingfold, though years should pass over our heads before we met again! And now—a lifetime since, almost—I am allowed to make that oath good!"

Hard and merciless was the voice of Milo Garth. Hatred the most intense gleamed in his eyes. Would simple death satisfy his vengeance, so long delayed? Damon Wingfold felt that it would not, and he closed his bloodshot eyes with a choking groan. Already he was beginning to pay the penalty due his great crimes!

"For a full week that ignorant, degraded half-breed watched over me day and night without a respite, scarcely closing his eyes in all that time. Hand to hand he fought death for the victory, and at the end of that period he seemed to conquer. The terrible fever left me. My brain grew clearer, though I was so weak that I could hardly lift my hand or move a muscle unaided.

"Even then faithful John would not take the rest he so sadly needed. He was afraid to close his eyes, lest some change for the worse should come while he was unconscious, and so, when I had taken a little broth, and seemed so much better, he told me that his family was living not many miles away, and that he was going to them, to bring his squaw back to nurse me. He would not be gone long. There was no danger of wild animals, and the little hut was so snugly hidden that a white man might pass it by within arm's length almost without suspecting what it really was. As for the red-skins, not one of them would attempt harm, with his mark on the door.

"And so he left me, to find—you know what, Damon Wingfold! To find only the wolf-gnawed remains of his father and mother, his sister and brother, his squaw and his children—not even the little baby scarce two months old had been spared!

"What matter? He was only a half-breed. His father was but a squaw-man, his mother a full-blood Indian. So was his squaw. And as to his children—only wretched spawn whom it was a mercy to kill!

"And yet, as he came back—even then faithful and true to one of the same color as those who had blotted all the light and comfort out of his life—I saw the tears rolling down his bronzed cheeks as he told how he gathered up the scattered fragments and started a fire about them, as the shortest method of burying them. He feared to leave his wounded friend an hour longer than necessity compelled him.

"As I listened to John, the whole frightful scene seemed painted on my brain, and I told him, what I afterward learned was true, that you, Damon Wingfold, was the leading spirit in that foul massacre! I told him where he would find you and your fellows. I bade him forget me and my lesser claims of your life. I bade him go and avenge his murdered family. But he would not listen. He knew that I would perish if left alone in my weak and still feverish state.

"For two days longer he nursed me, never closing his eyes in sleep that I could ascertain. And in those days I gained strength sufficient to bear the journey he was meditating.

"He made a rude looking but really comfortable chair into which he bound me. He managed to strap this on his back, and thus he set out in quest of aid for me, of help for himself, for avenging the murder of his family and kindred.

"How long that journey lasted, I am not sure. I only know that it consumed day after day. That when we came to a few lodges of his tribe I was worn to a shadow, the fever coming back to my poor brain.

"This much I have spoken of my own knowledge. What I have to say now, I only learned after years of darkness, of madness, if you will.

"John placed me under charge of their wisest medicine-woman, then told his tragic story. It was easy enough after that to gather about him a force of warriors quite sufficient, as they reasoned, to wipe the pale-skinned assassins from the face of the earth.

"John made me a brief visit before he left, telling me what he and his allies intended to do. He said that if possible, he would take the man whom I had described to him—you, Damon Wingfold!—captive, to bring back where I could see him face to face before he died.

"As I listened to him, my brain grew clearer for a little, and I remembered my friend, Sterling Coin. I could not believe that he had taken part in that merciless deed, and so I swore to John. I described the person I meant, and John promised if he could without risking the misfortune of the vengeance he had sworn, to spare my friend.

"They made all haste to the valley where I told John my party was watching. They saw the red light of the camp-fires, and lost much precious time in surrounding the huts, to make

their attack a success. They charged—to find the nest still warm, but the birds had flown!

"By torch-light they took up the trail, but it was slow work over such rocky soil, and it was long after day-dawn before they came to the point where Sterling Coin was hurled over the cliff. Being on the death trail, nothing could escape their eyes, and so they discovered the body lying in the gulch. It was one of the party they were following. Even though dead, it had a scalp, and John had sworn to take them all, to burn as a sacrifice over the ashes of his murdered family.

"John was the first one to reach the body, and as he bent over it he recognized the man I had begged him to spare, for my sake. Though so frightfully mangled, with seemingly every bone in his body crushed to splinters, the face was almost unmarred. And—yonder lies the living witness to the truth of my words!—there was yet life lingering in the poor devil!

"John left one brave in watch over the injured man, sending another back to bring the medicine-woman, or another nurse if she could not leave with safety to me. With the remainder of his party, he kept on in pursuit of the fleeing assassins.

"It would be too long to tell the story as John told it to me, many long years afterward. Enough that the white men, thinking themselves safe enough, stopped at fresh diggings to increase their store of gold, as four of them believed. But Damon Wingfold and his confederate, whose name I will not yet speak, plotted for chances by which those four men might be murdered and their shares be divided between the two survivors!

"It chanced that the Indians were discovered in time for the enemy to throw up a rude stone fort, and a long, desperate fight ensued. John led three charges on the fort, only to fall back as he saw his braves cowed by the rapid and deadly fire. And then he settled down to reduce the enemy by starvation.

"The white men dug a *cache* and buried their gold, then managed to steal out and flee. They gained some little distance before their desperate attempt was discovered. Chase was made, and all save the two most guilty of all were slain. They escaped—for that time!

With a gasping moan Precious Wingfold sunk lower beside the pallet on which lay Humpy Dick, or Sterling Coin, as he should now be called. She knew now, what she had long since begun to fear, who the confederate of Damon Wingfold must be—her father!

The deformed gently pressed her hand, but there came no answer. He lifted the veil sufficiently to gaze upon her pale face, when a wild cry brought Milo Garth to his side. The poor girl had fainted.

Milo Garth picked her up in his arms and bore her from the chamber, back to the second enlargement. He laid her on the skins, then returned to his prisoners. A word answered the hunchback, and he fell back on his pallet, quiet, reassured.

"John had the dead men brought back to the little fort," resumed Milo Garth, in his old, hard, cold tones. "He unearthed the gold, and after scalping and marking the dead, he buried them in the same spot. He leveled the fort to the ground, then retraced his way to the spot where Sterling Coin was left. And this is the reason, Damon Wingfold, why you found only festering bones where you counted on recovering your buried treasure! This is why you fled again from the hills, empty-handed, believing the gold for which you had dyed your soul blood-red was lost forever!

"Better for you, perhaps, had you retained that belief. Better for you, perhaps, had you not reasoned yourself into thinking you had made an error in the spot, thanks to the terror you were in when you hid the gold and fled through the night!

"John found Sterling Coin alive, though if he ever recovered his strength and senses, he would be a cripple. He found me living, gaining strength daily, but out of my mind. And for many long years I was a madman; not raving, but silent, shy, avoiding even my best friends.

"Never mind all that John told me of those years when I came back to my senses, after a long and perilous illness. Enough that the long ago was plain to my brain—that I could recollect perfectly everything that had happened to me up to the shot which you, Damon Wingfold, fired that black day—while all the rest was a blank.

"As soon as I was strong enough to travel, John took me to the spot where he had hidden the gold you abandoned. It belonged to me, he said, simply. If I had never regained my senses, it would have been buried with me. For he told me, on asking, that Sterling Coin was a madman who had wandered away, years ago, none knew whither.

"I took a portion of the gold and made my way to Denver. I found a fine city where last I had seen but a few huts, tents and shanties. But I did not linger long there. I bought decent clothes, fitted myself out and started for the city in the East where I had left a young wife waiting for my return with a fortune!

"Everything was altered here, as well. The old house was gone. My old neighbors had moved away or died. I was a perfect stranger, and as a stranger I made inquiries here and there until I came across one family who remembered Milo Garth and his young wife. More as a misty dream, however, than as a reality, for they never once suspected they were then speaking to Milo Garth himself!

"My wife had married again, believing me dead. As I afterward learned, the story of that ill-starred expedition was published far and near, according to the version which you, Damon Wingfold, gave out. The Indians had massacred all save yourself and brother. And with the names of the lost, mine figured prominently, as the victim of both bullet and fire!

"Who was it my wife married? You know the name I heard, Damon Wingfold!" hoarsely uttered Milo Garth, his dark face for the first time showing outward traces of fierce rage as he strode forward and stood over the cowering wretch, who expected to be crushed to pulp beneath those heavy feet.

Only for a few moments did Milo Garth permit his savage hatred to break down his enforced composure. He turned away from the criminal, and as he resumed his story, he stood facing Rex Stuart and his mates.

"Having murdered the husband, Damon Wingfold woos and wins the wife. That was the next blow I was dealt. Do you wonder that I love him so ardently? Do you marvel that I at once set about hunting him up, though it was long and weary work, for he had vanished from the city where he had made such noble amends for his crime!

"Here and there, through State after State I sought him, only to fail. My gold gave out, and I was forced to go back to my hidden treasure for more. And there I met John, still faithful, still true! Only for him and for an old friend whom I shortly afterward recovered through John, I believe I would have set down the whole world as too evil and treacherous to be worth the living in!

"John brought me to where Sterling Coin was living in a cave—this very one. He was deformed, as you see. He was crazy, as you may have heard. But through all he was honest and true, and soon we were even firmer friends than even while both were sound and ourselves."

"It was your care and teachings that made me what I am now, daddy," faintly smiled the cripple. "I was a wild beast, then. You tenderly nursed back the faint spark of reason until I have my brain again. If I ever forget that, may God forget me!"

The two strange men interchanged looks that told how deep and fervent was their love for and confidence in each other, but then Milo Garth turned again to the gold-hunters, whom he seemed to look upon as a jury before whom he was pleading this case.

"One day while coming back from my hidden treasure, I fell in with a party of hunters, who astonished me by saying that the Wingfold brothers were at that moment living in Denver! Think of it! Almost within arms' length of me, while I had been hunting for them in a hundred cities thousands of miles away!

"How I managed to escape awakening their suspicions, I know not to this day. My brain seemed on fire with the startling news. So near! So soon to be met! To—what?

"I dared not stop to think over that part. I knew that if I lost an hour, my enemies might again escape me. And so, without even stopping to tell Humpy Dick—for so he called himself now—whither I was bound, I set out for Denver.

"I found Damon Wingfold. It was no difficult task. He was known to every citizen, it seems. I found him, and before I could utter a word or even call him by name, he recognized me! He shouted for help. He yelled out robbery, murder! He drew a revolver, and tried to shoot me down. And when I grappled with him, tearing the weapon from his hand, men came in and overpowered me.

"You have heard of what followed, for the story was published far and wide. Damon Wingfold swore that I had assaulted him. That the weapon they found in my hand was mine. That I tried my best to murder him, and was only foiled by his great agility and wonderful nerve.

"Some officers took charge of me, and I was going quietly with them to prison, when a mob began to gather, raised, as I afterward learned, by Damon Wingfold, through one or two of his paid dependents. He feared to have me brought to trial on the charge he had made on the spur of the moment, lest I cover him with shame and bring his own neck perilously near the noose, by telling the true story of the lost *cache*.

"Not until the mob overpowered the officers and tore me from them did I fight for myself. Not until they raised the yell for blood did I strike a single blow—and only then in self-defense. I swear this by the God who sits in the heavens above us this day.

"I escaped, with blood on my hands. Damon Wingfold called me Dark Durg, probably because that was the first name that occurred to

him on the spur of the moment, and as such I was pronounced an outlaw. I was haunted like a mad dog. I was charged with crimes of which I never was guilty, as I can prove by a tool whom Damon Wingfold used in some of those very deeds of blood and outrage.

"Now, gentlemen," his voice growing cold and even as he gazed at the gold-hunters, who were listening with an almost painful interest to his strange, tragic story. "I ask you one question, and request an answer such as you would give were you on the jury-stand and this black history unfolded before you.

"But first, try to imagine all that Sterling Coin and I have suffered through the crimes of Damon Wingfold. Bear in mind not only our physical sufferings, but our mental tortures as well. Think of what *his* lot is in life!" pointing toward Sterling Coin, who feebly, slowly rose to his feet, exhibiting his frightful deformity in full. "Before that dastardly deed, he was tall and straight and comely as the best man among you all. Think of what he is now. Try to weigh the years he has lost, his mind worse than a blank.

"Look at me. An outlaw. An Ishmaelite. A price on my head. A man robbed not only of his name, but honor, freedom, save as a fugitive, wife—robbed of everything that makes life lovely and precious!

"Cast into the scale the long years when my brain was clouded in madness. And bear in mind, also, that poor half-breed, John. Think of his family, butchered without mercy! Think of the little babe whose brains were dashed out even as it lay on its dead mother's bosom!

"Try and bring all this to view, and then look at yonder wretch! Look at his craven face! See him shrink and shiver as I speak!

"And now tell me—is Damon Wingfold innocent or is he guilty?"

Milo Garth moved aside and passed an arm about the trembling form of Sterling Coin, coldly, seemingly unmoved, as he awaited the response.

The gold-hunters gazed upon the livid, fear-contorted face of the moaning wretch opposite, and the last faint doubt was dispelled from their minds. They could not speak, but Milo Garth stepped forward and removed their gags, as though he felt that they had had time enough to consider the case.

"Guilty, the cur!" grated Louis Knapp, his honest face flushed with just indignation, and "guilty" echoed his two mates.

Rex Stuart was silent, but Milo Garth did not heed that. A hard, grating laugh parted his lips as he strode forward, saying:

"You are tried and found guilty, Damon Wingfold! Now—vengeance!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE GOLD PHANTOM MATERIALIZED.

"HAVE mercy! Spare them, even as you hope to receive mercy when the day of judgment for your own actions comes!"

Precious Wingfold rushed into the rock-cell—a chamber of judgment, it might also be called—and fell on her knees before Milo Garth. Her clasped hands were uplifted. Her pale face was wet with tears, far more bitter than she had ever shed before. Her hair fell in rippling masses down her back, broken from its confinement. Her attitude displayed her magnificent form to admiration, and if she had been a professional actress, making a study of "effect," she could not have succeeded more perfectly.

Milo Garth started back a little at her sudden entrance, his face growing even colder and harder than at first. But as he looked upon the maiden and saw her streaming tears; as he listened to that passionate, yet trembling appeal; the frown slowly faded from his face and the ghost of a smile came to his thin lips.

He stepped forward, taking her hands. He would have raised her to her feet, but she resisted him.

"Not until you have granted my prayer—not until you have said you will temper justice with mercy! Spare them—or let your blow fall upon my head, as well!"

"I strike only those who have struck me. Miss Wingfold," replied the Ishmael of the Hills, smiling as he gazed upon her beautiful face. "I have received only kindness through you. I owe to you the life of my one friend."

As he turned his gaze toward Humpy Dick, so Precious turned toward the deformed, her voice stronger, more hopeful as she uttered:

"If you are grateful, as you said, I beg of you to join with me in my prayer for mercy! Show yourself a man, true and noble! Forget the terrible wrongs you have suffered—rise superior to the frightful past, and as my friend, my brother, join me in begging this man to have mercy on those who have wronged him and you! Do this—save them—and I will devote my life to making what amends I can for the terrible injuries you have received at their hands!"

Sterling Coin took her hand and lifted it to his lips. He said nothing in words, but there was a gravely questioning light in his eyes as he looked into the face of his comrade. Dark Durg avoided meeting that gaze, though his voice was softened as he spoke to Precious:

"That I am not all evil, not all hard and

merciless, let this prove to you, Miss Wingfold."

He took her hand and led her toward Rex Stuart, whom she had not given a second glance since entering the chamber. A touch of his keen knife set the lover at liberty, and Rex Stuart caught Precious in his arms, pressing his lips to her cold brow. But then the eyes of the maiden turned back to Milo Garth, who bowed his head slightly, taking her hand once more in his. And thus he led her over to where, pale, fear-tortured, trembling like a leaf in every limb and every fiber, Maurice Wingfold lay anticipating punishment for the crimes which had so unexpectedly come to light.

"You ask me to show mercy, Miss Wingfold," gravely uttered Milo Garth, as he pointed with one bony finger to the ashen face of the detected criminal. "You ask this after hearing at least a portion of my story. Do you ask it after I say, as I do now, that the confederate of Damon Wingfold lies at your feet? Do you ask it when I say that Maurice Wingfold aided to work all this wrong and injury against Sterling Coin?"

"He is my father," faltered Precious, her voice so choked with tears as to be hardly articulate. "He is old and feeble. Give him time to repent, if he be really the guilty being you say!"

The avenger smiled faintly as he noticed the sudden change in her manner. It was woman-like, he whispered in his heart. It is nature for them to cling to hope until the very last; and who would alter this?

He stooped and removed the gag from the jaws of Maurice Wingfold, then rose erect, his arms folded, his eyes glowing vividly, holding those of the trembling wretch as by fascination.

"Have I falsely accused you, Maurice Wingfold? Did you not plot against the life of your companions with Damon Wingfold? Speak!"

"Mercy! Spare my life!" gasped the old man, shrinking back.

"Answer me: have I falsely accused you?" sternly cried Milo Garth.

"No—it is too true! I have sinned, but I am repentant! Spare me, and I'll be your slave for life!"

"For my sake!" murmured Precious, brokenly. "For your own sake, I should say!" and her voice grew stronger, more steady, her eyes flashing with a light that was almost inspired. "Spare them, and show the world how much greater, nobler, truer to all the precepts of Our Father you are, than those who so hastily condemned you! Revenge may be sweet for the first few moments, but the memory of it will grow more and more bitter as the days pass by, until you will hate and loathe yourself even as you hate and loathe these, your enemies of long ago. Spare them, I beg of you—on my knees I plead for their lives! Show mercy, and I will pray for you night and morning!"

Her voice grew choked again. Her head bowed, and she would have clasped his knees with her trembling hands had he not stooped quickly and raised her to her feet.

For one moment he gazed into her eyes, then gently touched her white forehead with his cold lips. He placed her in the arms of Rex Stuart, then stooped and cut the bonds that confined Maurice Wingfold.

"You owe your life to that sweet, pure child, Maurice Wingfold," he said coldly, as he again rose erect. "If you ever forget the debt, may I be the one to freshen your memory!"

Precious, with a sobbing cry, dropped to her knees beside the old man, his hands clasped in hers, their tears mingling.

Milo Garth watched them for a breath, then turned on his heel and strode over to where Damon Wingfold was watching them all, his greenish-gray eyes filled with a strange light, his haggard face frightfully contorted, though the principal emotion did not seem to be bodily fear.

"As for you, Damon Wingfold, who will dare utter a prayer? Who will lift their voices in your behalf? And whom do you think I would listen to, even if such appeals were made?" he added, with a short, merciless laugh as he stooped and cut the thong that held the gag in place.

"I don't ask—I don't beg—like that cur!" gasped the other, viciously glaring toward his half-brother. "Kill me—as I meant to kill you! I'm only sorry I failed—only sorry that I did not kill that cowardly forger at the same time! Better for you if I had, for then you might have found your wife yet waiting and—"

"Utter not her name, you cur!" snarled Milo Garth savagely.

"They lied—it was Maurice who married her! And that girl is your daughter, not his!" cried Damon, desperately.

Maurice Wingfold had confirmed the words of his half-brother. He it was who met and fell in love with the fair young widow of the man whom—so he swore, and so he made them all believe—he believed a victim to savage ferocity. He swore that Damon never told him the truth of that first stroke to win the golden treasure.

He found Mrs. Garth a mother, though neither

she nor Milo Garth had any suspicions that the future had in store such a boon for them, when they parted, the husband to join in the mad rush for the fabulous golden sands of Cherry Creek. He wooed and won her, while Precious was too young to remember that she ever had another father.

Strangely softened, for the first time in so many long, weary years, beginning to realize that there was, after all, something in life worth cherishing besides vengeance, Milo Garth sat with his head bowed and his face hidden in his bronzed hands, listening to Precious—his child!—pleading the cause of the evil man who had wronged them all.

"To slay him would not obliterate the past, dear father. It would not give back the years of pain and madness. It would not straighten the form of this, your dear friend, my brother," gently touching the bowed head of the deformed with her trembling hand. "But it would fill my poor heart with sorrow and regret. It would make it very hard for me to look upon you, as I hope to do in time, as a kind, generous parent. For ever before my eyes, ever between you and I would rise a bloody phantom of—father! spare the evil wretch, I beg of you!"

"Let time punish him, daddy," softly muttered Sterling Coin.

"Make him confess his crimes, to be witnessed by us all when written down and signed with his own hand," added Rex Stuart. "Make him acknowledge his sins against you, both of the long ago and those of more recent days. Make him confess how he wrongfully accused you, how he set that mob to raise the cry of lynch-law, and tear you from the officers of justice. Make him admit that he has devised crimes since then for the express purpose of still further blackening your name. And when he has done all this, let him go his way. Be sure he will feel the punishment far more than he would death at your hands."

And so it was finally decided. And Rex Stuart took upon himself the duty of placing the alternative before Damon Wingfold.

He entered upon the duty with a right good will, and before many hours he had a full confession written out and signed by Damon Wingfold, admitting the attempted murders of years ago—but why repeat?

Surely the story has been sufficiently outlined in these pages?

But there was one point made by Rex Stuart which requires mention, although it was not set down in the written confession. He learned who held the forged notes through means of which Damon Wingfold hoped to force Precious to wed his son, Earl. And from what he had already learned of the matter, Rex knew that he could readily prevent them from ever coming to light, thanks to the GOLD PHANTOM, which Milo Garth had assured them should soon be materialized.

Deprived of their weapons, given a scanty supply of food, Damon and Earl Wingfold were turned loose, to make the best of their way back to Denver, on foot, unless they should be so fortunate as to fall in with some of their defeated, scattered ruffians.

And when they went, Milo Garth bade Rex Stuart sally forth and tell gallant Jack Jones, who was still scouring the neighborhood with his men in search of his missing employer and "the little angel," where they might be found.

And right jolly did the veteran become when he once more met Precious Wingfold. Many were the subdued ejaculations, many the smothered oaths of amazement, that found birth as he listened to the strange story which Precious, sitting hand in hand with her smiling lover, told the old "barnacle."

And with the first gleam of the next sun, a party set forth from the valley to unearth the lost cache, to materialize the GOLD PHANTOM!

And as they gathered around the yellow store which had caused so much sin and suffering, so many sleepless nights, so much vain searching and seeking, they all forgot this while laughing over the graphic description Rex Stuart gave of how he unearthed the marvelous treasure so carefully cherished by "Humpy Dick."

That wild delusion could only be accounted for by believing that, even in his madness, Sterling Coin retained a glimmer of the past. No doubt he formed the skin bags, filled and buried them, fancying in his madness that he was concealing the gold for which his life had been attempted. And Milo Garth, humoring the harmless notion, never tried to show his crippled friend how he was deceiving himself, but furnished him with the gold that gave a color to his crazy boastings while the poison of Denver saloons burned in his poor brain.

Our friends returned to Denver, and the sensation which was created by the publishing of the confession signed by Damon Wingfold, so numerous witnessed, will still be remembered by many whose eyes may scan these lines. And from that day "Dark Durg" was at liberty to walk the streets in broad daylight, without fear of having the "blue coats" prove too warm in their attentions.

But Milo Garth did not linger long in Denver. A few weeks, during which Maurice Wingfold was rendered almost happy by having Rex Stuart place in his hands some papers which the old man immediately burned; during which there was a wedding, where Precious Wingfold—for, to avoid the troublesome questions which might follow the announcement of another name in a circle where she had been known for so many years, she retained that name—became Precious Stuart, and Rex became supremely happy; during which there was a funeral.

For neither Damon Wingfold nor his son Earl ever reached Denver alive! A party of hunters brought in word of their death. They had been scalped and mutilated, but were still readily identified.

Milo Garth smiled grimly as he heard the news. He knew that John, the half-breed, had at length kept his oath of so many years ago.

The remains were brought to Denver and decently interred by Maurice Wingfold, who was greatly changed of recent days. Perhaps he felt the coming shadow. It may be. For he never left Denver, as at first intended, with the bridal party, but faded and grew weaker and weaker until, with Precious and her husband and Milo Garth and Sterling Coin by his bedside, he closed his eyes and passed away.

A more peaceful end than he really deserved, perhaps. But who shall say that he had not fully repented his sins before the Death Angel summoned him?

Precious and Rex now reside in an Eastern city, with Milo Garth and Sterling Coin. The Gold Phantom has made them comfortably rich, and they have their share of content and happiness.

Anything more?

Yes—Moses Sawyer, the Droop-eared Daisy, returned to Denver on being set at liberty by Milo Garth, only to fall into the hands of an officer from California, who succeeded in persuading him to return to San Quentin, there to "do time" on the old charge.

THE END.

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